

On the 20th Anniversary of the Handover: An interview on the current political situation in Hong Kong

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Robin Lee interviews Au Loong-Yu, a long term activist, writer and member of the Pioneer, a Hong Kong socialist organisation, about the political situation in Hong Kong twenty years after Hong Kong's reunification with China.

Robin Lee - Thinking back to the handover, what were your expectations at the time and how do they compare with the situation in Hong Kong today. Were your expectations met?

Au Loong-Yu - Yes and No. In 1997 there was already a split between the pan-democrats and the social movement because the pan-democrat parties refused to organise any actions or demonstrations to remind the Chinese Communist Party that we wanted Hong Kong people to run Hong Kong and that we wanted a democratic handover. The pan-democrats refused to do anything like this though. And so the other social groups—this involved over a hundred groups such as trade unions, community groups, church groups and so on—organised a coalition to stage a demonstration to demand that sovereignty should be returned to the people. We deliberately held a demonstration at midnight on 31st June in 1997, to symbolise that we would fight for democracy beyond British colonial rule. There were some small clashes with the police but they were not big. Although many people were very discontent with the behaviour of the pan-democrats and it was good that an independent demonstration was organised, there was a failure to act and move beyond this single action to build more progressive and radical parties beyond 1997. It was a one off thing. One of the organisers of the demonstration recently talked to me and said that she regrets that they did not do more twenty years back. She now thinks that Hong Kong political activists should have had a deep split from the pan-democrats twenty years ago, rather than doing it now which is a bit too late.

A more interesting reason why this coalition was not sustainable is that it fell into the Communist Party's trap of its tactic to defer the showdown or crackdown. Before 1997 many people were of course feeling very insecure and did not know whether the Communist Party would finish off Hong Kong's political freedom very quickly. In retrospect, I think the Communist Party was very clever not to do anything drastic at all in the first stage of the handover. Even though immediately after 1997 there was a provisional unelected legislature that was imposed on Hong Kong people, this provisional legislature was also quite self restrained and it didn't implement Article 23 of the Basic Law (which stipulates that Hong Kong must make into law the safeguarding of national security as defined by Beijing) straight away, as most of us had feared, and so the Communist Party in retrospect adopted a deferring tactic. The problem is that many Hong Kong activists became hypnotised by this kind of tactic and so they thought, 'ok the CP is not too bad and so there is no urgency to be more radical, to be more organised and to be more assertive', and this explains why

there was no talk of reforming the democratic movement and starting a new more radical democratic party at all. There was no discussion ever.

This proved two things: on the one hand the Communist Party's tactics worked and on the other hand most of the political parties and social movements were too naïve. Many believed that Hong Kong freedom would be kept indefinitely. Even in 2003 when the Communist Party tried to push the Hong Kong government to table the Article 23 national security bill, when 500,000 people took to the street and stopped all the traffic along major roads on Hong Kong Island in demonstration against it, the Communist Party retreated. Everything returned to normal and so this gave people the illusion that although the Communist Party was bad in what it had tried to do, it still retreated very quickly. This therefore actually reinforced the kind of illusion that two systems could be maintained.

Now 20 years have passed, it is interesting to see how we have become weaker. I think it is depressing to see how quite a lot of people expect a low turnout in the demonstration on the handover anniversary day. In general there is a feeling of pessimism among activists. Actually this pessimism has been becoming more and more serious since the Umbrella Movement. This is not only because we achieved nothing, but also because since the Umbrella Movement the Communist Party has been intervening more openly and more aggressively in Hong Kong. But the democratic camp doesn't know how to adjust its strategies and tactics and doesn't know how to react to the strengthening of intervention from Beijing. This is the problem now. Whereas 20 years back there was a certain kind of militancy in staging this demonstration, today, after 20 years, we are in a much weaker and much more depressing situation. This is the biggest contrast.

You mentioned the Umbrella Movement in 2014 where thousands were involved in protests and occupation over many weeks to demand universal suffrage. Your comments earlier seemed to be quite pessimistic about this. Could you explain a little more about your thoughts on the movement and the impact it has had on Hong Kong politics since then?

I think in the long run the Umbrella Movement will prove to be very important even if it did not achieve anything, as I would characterise it as the first really massive movement which reflects a very popular yearning for democratic self-rule and democracy. Surely the voice for a democratic Hong Kong, the voice for decolonisation accompanied by real autonomy and democracy has always been there for a very long time. In 1989 we had a very big solidarity movement with the democratic movement in Beijing, but this was also a very important watershed for political development here in Hong Kong. It represented another step forward and that we really want to support the Chinese democracy movement. But this movement was also limited by the fact that it was a movement in solidarity with China, while not a movement which also at the same time pushed forward democratic reform here in Hong Kong. After the end of the democratic movement in Beijing, ironically, the biggest movement here in Hong Kong in late 1989 and 1990 was about pressing the British government to give us the right of abode. It was not about how we needed and wanted democracy, or how we wanted to run our own government. The democratic parties pushed a very popular campaign to press the British government to do this and in the end the British government only gave passports to 50,000 families in Hong Kong before the campaign ended. The democratic parties were satisfied with this because actually in their hearts they only wanted the middle class to get the passports and didn't care if common people didn't get one.

At least in 2014 for the first time in the post-war era we had a real massive democracy movement. However in the medium term, because the movement came to nothing and because the students and social groups which supported the Umbrella Movement were so inexperienced and allowed the far right to attack them in the later stage while they were reluctant to defend themselves, we can see that political adaptation, if not capitulation, is to this far right. And so in the end, it was the localist

far right which reaped the fruits of the Umbrella Movement. After the Umbrella Movement the far right were then able to smash the Hong Kong Federation of Students (HKFS), which had been the leader of the Umbrella Movement. In under a year, the far right localists did something that the Communist Party could not do; it dismantled the HKFS through agitation and causing its affiliate college students unions to withdraw from it. Now we are witnessing one of the aftermaths of the defeat and most student unions are now in the hands of the localists. They may not be far right but they are nativists and don't give a damn about social justice or defending democracy and fighting the Communist Party, even if their rhetoric condemns the Communist Party. And so the far right localists destroyed one of the most important strong holds of the democratic movement, especially amongst the student arena. In the short run the impact of the Umbrella Movement is depressing.

You mentioned the rise of localism and the far right since the Umbrella Movement. Could you explain more about the reasons for this? And is anything being done by civil society or social movement groups to counter this?

Yes, we must recognise that objectively speaking there is a yearning for a localist sentiment. Actually in its very rudimentary form it is very mixed. It is a mixture of opposition to the Communist Party, a feeling of nostalgia, and also relates to the deteriorating situation at every level of society. You have worsening poverty and housing problems, a degenerating education system and so it is a mixture of many things and people are becoming more local oriented. This is a response to the kind of Hong Kong that the Communist Party and the ruling elites here want to turn Hong Kong into. In their eyes, Hong Kong shouldn't be a political city; it should just be an economic city. This is a typically colonial idea. The British government already thought that Hong Kong should just remain a free trade port and serve the British Empire. Anything beyond this was not Hong Kong's role. This always angered young people. In the 1970s this angered us as well. So we must recognise that there is a true resentment against this ruling class view of Hong Kong. We want a Hong Kong which serves us. On its own this is not necessarily a right wing view, it could be left wing.

The problem is that in Hong Kong there are no left parties at all, and all the pan-democrat parties are all centre-right. As a result, Hong Kong's so called laissez-faire regime has produced a very strongly competitive and social Darwinist mentality. Once this localist feeling begins to brew it is always easier for the right wing to capture it and steer it in a xenophobic direction.

But there is also a third element which is in play. From all the circumstantial evidence, it is clear that some of the outspoken localist and far right politicians are acting in collaboration with the Communist Party. The reports in *Sing Pao* demonstrate this. *Sing Pao* has always been a very conservative newspaper which supports the Communist Party. Since last year, however, it suddenly became a very vocal opponent of CY Leung (Hong Kong's Chief Executive). This breaks the rules of the pro-Beijing camp here that whatever their internal differences they must support the Chief Executive. But *Sing Pao* not only made accusations against CY Leung, it particularly made the accusation that CY Leung should be held responsible for the rise of the Hong Kong independence movement. It accused him of secretly supporting these people. It also further said that the China Liaison Office head also secretly has a role in supporting the independence movement. In addition to the *Sing Pao* accusations, there is also the fact that during last year's elections many very young people, fresh grads, suddenly got a lot of money to run very expensive election campaigns. In fact one year ago, in the district board election, we already witnessed some localists being sentenced to prison for election campaign fraud. During cross-examination they revealed that they were subsidised by the Communist Party to run elections against the pan-democrats.

And so it is this interaction of several factors at the same time that has given rise to the far right localists and has suddenly turned into an independence movement. You can also see that the rise of the independence movement gives a very good pretext to the Communist Party to attack Hong Kong

autonomy by disqualifying two independence movement Legislative Council members and now they are going on the offensive to pursue other LegCo members for the same reason.

Actually I see the xenophobia, far-right localist and anti-China sentiments as just the same thing. We must not forget that in Hong Kong lots of people identify as Chinese. Most of the people do not see their Chinese identity as necessarily opposed to their Chinese [Hong Kong?] identity. And for young people? There is a big generation gap here and although young people do not necessarily identify as Chinese this does not necessarily make them anti-Chinese. Those who are explicitly anti-Chinese are the far right localists. Of course they are getting a hearing among certain young people. Because of the primitivism of political education here in Hong Kong many people can't distinguish between being anti-Communist Party and anti-Chinese. But most of this sympathy towards the far right localists is not through joining their party; their party is very small. On the internet they look very big, but mind you on the internet there are also a lot of *wumaodang* (people paid to defend Beijing by posting comments on the internet). But based on what has been explicitly spoken on the internet and at rallies, we can safely say that this anti-Chinese feeling is merged with the far-right localists in general.

What has been done to challenge this? Unfortunately very little. The pan-democrats, they do sometimes try to counter this anti-Chinese mentality but they counterpose HK identity with their own Chinese identity. They are still embracing Chinese nationalism even if it is a weaker version. But this seals their fate as it totally severs their links with the younger generation. It collides directly with the aspirations of the young generation and so I think it is a self defeating attempt to try to counterpose Hong Kong identity with Chinese identity. The only sensible attempt is to respect the fact that many people see themselves as Hong Kongers, and see that this is not necessarily counterposed to Chinese identity. Counterposing the two identities is a false dichotomy in the first place. We must solve the dilemma by opposing the Communist Party and defending Hong Kong identity and we must put this in a bigger democratic framework. This means we need a real democratic alternative. This is the only alternative that can counter the far right localists; combining the defence of Hong Kong autonomy and democratic transformation in China.

The problem is that, amongst common people and activists here in Hong Kong, democratic aspirations are also very shallow. It is very difficult for them to conceive of a democratic strategy which can point us forward for the next two or three decades. Fortunately there are attempts to search for such a direction. We now have three pro self-determination LegCo members who are trying to explore a direction which is not xenophobic, while assertively opposing the Communist Party. But they are just in the early stage of exploration and it is very obvious that they can easily be pressed from the right and that they sometimes adapt to right wing localist pressure. And so it still early to say how committed they are to a democratic self-determination strategy.

How would you characterise recent demands for autonomy and self-determination?

I think one of the bright sides of the picture is that there are growing numbers of people who listen to this self-determination call. I can still remember when we first proposed the idea 35 years ago and we were absolutely alone. This is because the pan-democrats are content with seeking universal suffrage within the limits of the Basic Law. But this is self-defeating. You will never get real universal suffrage within the Basic Law because the Basic Law gives the power of interpretation solely to Beijing. In one of the clauses it is very explicit that the central government can make the Chief Executive do anything through an executive order. So from the very beginning there has not been any real Hong Kong autonomy. The pan-democrats are just deceiving themselves when they think that they enjoy it. But because of this naïve mentality and conciliatory attitude towards the Communist Party, in the end the pan-democrat parties misled the Hong Kong democratic movement for more than 35 years and it has ended up with nothing. Universal suffrage is not in sight at all.

What is happening now is exactly the opposite and we are losing our autonomy fast. I would say that Hong Kong has already been taken over by the black hole of Communist Party rule. It is just an illusion that we see Hong Kong unchanged.

In the last five years people have been seeing the truth; that they have been deceived by the Communist Party and that there is no such thing as one country two systems or real Hong Kong autonomy. And so there are people who are now picking up the demand for self determination again. This does not necessarily mean independence; it is about giving us our own choice. The Communist Party is saying that anyone who calls for self determination is really calling for independence. This is not true, but people are scared too. So we can witness a very contradictory situation; on the one hand more people can see the need to fight for autonomy and self-determination but on the other hand, because of the absolute asymmetry of the relationship of power, many people are very pessimistic about winning anything at all. So I would say it is the best time and also the worst time to fight for self-determination.

Reflecting on this, what are the major challenges now facing Hong Kong civil society and the democracy movement over the next twenty years? What is the outlook for the future?

The biggest challenge for the democratic movement is firstly to find a solid social base. For the past 35 years we have been lectured that the Hong Kong democratic movement depends on the middle class. And so the pan-democrats are in absolute complete consensus with Lipset and modernisation theory; that with modernisation we have the growth of the middle class and the democratisation of society depends on this growing middle class. The past democratic movement builds on this thesis. But this is a thesis which does not hold water and which has not been tested by real life. After 35 years the Democratic Party remains very small and actually remains very capitulatory and so it is very clear that they could not bring us forward anymore. This brings us to the question: which part of society should the democratic movement be based on? Unfortunately this question has not yet been seriously posed. But I think that it has to be answered very quickly.

It is very clear that the Hong Kong democratic movement can only find a social base in working people and the young generation. But the second challenge is that we are not going to find a politically ready strata. We are not going to find a solid base right now in the working people, in the unions or amongst young people. There is no such thing because for the past 35 years the so called democratic movement has actually just been an electoral movement. The pan-democrats never provided a serious political education, or mind changing advocacy. They have not been concerned about really going to the masses to build a democratic force which is deep rooted in the community. They only want votes and to woo electors when election time comes.

What the democratic parties and the electors understand about democracy is therefore very little. Among working people, students and so on there is a wish for democracy but they do not have a full vision of it. They can't understand basic things such as how democracy necessarily means that you can challenge the present constitution. That is why we have a democratic movement which always revolves around a single issue. We don't challenge the Basic Law; we just want universal suffrage for the legislature and the Chief Executive. We never challenge the fact that both the Chief Executive and the legislature have no real power. The real power lies in the hands of Beijing or the Liaison Office. And so in the end we have a democratic movement which is misled and the common people and independent trade unions have little understanding. This is why it is not surprising to see that in certain independent trade unions there are also far right localists.

We have a difficult situation and the challenge is that this social space for the democratic movement has to be built from nothing. If there is a certain milieu who may be our potential constituency, for instance people from the trade unions, the problem is that they have no political education at all and

they are old. One of the horrible things now is that the old trade union leaders are becoming more and more out of touch and so are not going to attract any more young people. As for the young people, the dismantling of HKFS can tell you how fragile the so called democratic students' movement is. There is no such movement at all. Even previously during the Umbrella Movement it was already very fragile. Although they were able to mobilise a ten thousand student class boycott, this was just a bubble. In the day to day occupation they can only mobilise four to five dozen students. They always lacked manpower. Now with the dismantling of the HKFS there are no organised forces at all. So the biggest challenge is how to build something from scratch. It is not going to be easy.

P.S.

* <https://borderless-hk.com/2017/06/29/on-the-20th-anniversary-of-the-handover/>