

How the ‘Lion Rock Spirit’ crushed Hong Kong’s calls for strikes

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‘Liberate Hong Kong, The Revolution of Our Times’ is not just any chant; it is an idea rooted in a decolonial politics.

In the four months of Hong Kong’s anti-extradition movement as of November 2019, people could often only be mobilized to take to the streets on the weekends. The local movement has always been dominated by these street protests, but they haven’t been the most effective strategy of resistance. Any use of force by protesters has inevitably been dwarfed in the face of the wildly disproportionate scale of police violence, meaning that facing off every weekend likely had very little impact on the establishment. Indeed, it has become all the more difficult for us to force the government to make big concessions on the streets. The movement seems to have arrived at an impasse even as it developed and evolved.

In addition to constant street protests, there have also been numerous calls for strikes to halt the day-to-day running of the city, forcing the government to make concessions. But the strikes spurred by the movement often lasted only one day, and had little impact on Hong Kong’s economic operations. These brief strikes, such as the one on August 5th 2019, essentially extended the weekend’s struggle by a single weekday. These one-and-a-half-day strikes have not injected much new energy into the movement, and thus have barely realized their full potential. From these strikes, we can unpack the difficulties organizations and participants have faced, and the symptoms of the historical failure of strike actions in Hong Kong.

The weakening of union power

During the colonial period, industrial workers, workers’ movements and trade unions in Hong Kong were all more or less suppressed by the colonial suzerain state (英國政府) of the time, Britain. In the ‘50s and ‘60s, economic policy in British Hong Kong followed in the footsteps of the British government’s *laissez-faire* principles. That capitalists and workers found themselves on extremely unequal footing was itself already a mode of repression. As the gap widened in light of systematic neglect of workers, the capitalists found their way to power entirely unobstructed.

During the Cold War, the colonial government created different policies to curb the influence of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in Hong Kong. This included creating anti-labor laws that constricted the registration of trade unions and banned civil servants from launching strikes and the support of such actions across professional sectors. The formation of trade unions at the time was politically charged, decisively demarcated by a political landscape polarized by the CCP and the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT). Unions, therefore, became first and foremost vessels for political slugfests rather than a force to protect workers’ rights. Union power was thus fractured.

After the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, leftist unions traded their fight for collective bargaining power for social stability and focused only on benefits for their members. The

profit-driven motive behind this tendency was clear; at the time, one third of China's income from foreign exchange markets came from Hong Kong, so the Chinese government naturally wanted Hong Kong society to remain [as stable as possible](#). The unions stopped agitating for workers' rights, and the capitalists promptly disavowed the institution of the trade union while unilaterally dismissing bargaining rights. In the aftermath of the chaos of the Civil War and amidst the oppression of the colonial government, union power, prior to the 1970s, had become increasingly stagnant.

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After the riots of '67, the British colonial government in Hong Kong modified their methods of governing and [proactively strengthened](#) workers' rights in order to regain stability. The government played the role of the worker's guardian, giving workers more power via legal protections such as the Employment Ordinance, which defined contract terms, salary, and leave, as well as other workers' benefits. The regulations regarding trade unions also showed a willingness to protect workers' powers to unionize, but the provisions of these laws remained quite limited. These legal changes focused narrowly on the rights of the individual worker, but did not strengthen the role of trade unions themselves. As workers found their protections guaranteed without having to rely on organizing, workers began to exit the labor movement. Consequently, collective power became a challenge, and trade unions were again weakened as a result.

The final nail in the union movement's coffin was Hong Kong's flourishing economy. Opportunities were everywhere. When workers encountered exploitation, switching from job to job became a commonplace practice as workers merely sought better workplaces rather than turn to the unions or the law. This seemed to make unions more or less obsolete.

Union power was already very weak post-handover, and most of it ended up getting absorbed into the pro-establishment camp. The [Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions](#) (FTU) became the largest alliance of trade unions in Hong Kong, comprising about 200 individual unions from all sorts of professions, including transportation and logistics, service, and tourism. The goal of the pro-establishment camp was to steadily develop Hong Kong, so it tolerated neither political nor economic strikes. In recent calls for strike action, FTU ordered its members to remain at their posts, business-as-usual.

A high degree of organization is required for any successful strike, and the capacity to organize does not simply appear out of nowhere: one of the prerequisites would be a close relationship between the union and the worker. However, the unions that should have taken the lead in calling for and organizing strikes were already weakened during the colonial period, coopted and refashioned as pro-establishment pawns after the handover. Now then, how would the remaining stragglers succeed in engineering a large-scale, tightly coordinated strike? With the current organizational vacuum, the prospect of a mass strike is not at all optimistic. Trapped in their role as “a cog in the economy” (□□□)—indeed, the perennial *homo economicus*—since the British colonial era, Hongkongers continue to struggle from a position of vulnerability.

The bondage of ‘the cog’

Hong Kong's meteoric rise from a fishing village into an international finance center was inevitable during the course of accumulation and expansion under British colonialism. And yet, the British did not measure Hong Kong's worth by the size of its territory, but in the political and economic benefits it would bring. The British Empire took advantage of Hong Kong's opportune location between China and the rest of Asia to mold Hong Kong into an apolitical, solely economic city. Under Cold War formations, Hong Kong's earlier role as an entrepôt gave way to the development of light industry.

Hongkongers, buoyed by the abundance of consumer goods, started focusing on “gettin’ that bread.”

As Hong Kong’s economy soared in the ’70s, Hongkongers began benefitting from this economic framework. Sociologist Lui Tai-lok points out that ’70s Hong Kong was [at a crossroads](#) between the forces of “social time” (社會時間) and “family time” (家庭時間): the soaring economy improved the living conditions of individuals as well as their families, while the changing economic structure created more and more middle- and upper-class positions. For a new generation, these conditions provided a prime opportunity for upward mobility. In particular, the garment industry gave many poor people the chance to move upward, and although it was and still is seen today as a low-skill sector, some workers were able to rake in more than HK\$10,000 (US\$1290) per month and begin to own private property, according to the testimonies of retired garment workers.

A period of economic growth from the late 1960s to the 1990s saw Hong Kong become one of the Four Asian Tigers, and Hong Kong’s economic structure also began morphing from light industry into service economy. The convergence of “social time” and “family time” created the “[Lion Rock Spirit](#)” (獅子山精神): the belief that all you needed to raise a family, make a good living, and be successful was grit, hard work, and a can-do attitude. Meanwhile, the image of Hong Kong as an international center of finance was consolidated. Cultural studies scholar Law Wing-sang suggests that the colonial government actively tried to create an apolitical “[local consciousness](#)” for Hong Kong society in order to preempt future rumblings in the wake of the ’67 riots.

Later in the 1970s, when Hong Kong’s imminent return to China was reaffirmed, the colonial government embarked on a policy of “uncolonization” (去殖民化) by building public housing, creating satellite towns, fighting corruption, and planning festivities such as the Festival of Hong Kong for collective entertainment. This uncolonization process was meant to distinguish Hong Kong as different from other mainland Chinese cities and inculcate a sense of belonging based on the identity of the Hongkonger. And yet, Hongkongers themselves did not have agency in this supposed move toward undoing colonization. They were routinely barred from participating in politics—the colonial government only began creating a [semi-democratic system](#) in the 1980s and 1990s—which led to widespread disenfranchisement.

The colonial administration purposely forged a distinctly apolitical Hongkonger figure in a bait-and-switch that ensured the vacated space of politics would be occupied and concealed by the charge of economic advancement. At the same time, the golden era of television paved the way for popular programs that emphasized Hong Kong’s economic achievements. In this media landscape, depoliticized Hongkongers were fed the values of stability and prosperity above all else. In the 1980s, as local culture thrived and a petit bourgeois ethos tightened its grip on the mainstream, the Hongkonger as an economic being—dynamic, enterprising, confident, and curious—elevated individualism and meritocracy as the definitive structure of living.

Hong Kong’s lasting depiction as an economic hub is deep-rooted, and the post-handover government did not try to unravel Hongkongers’ economic identity. Scholar Hui Po-keung has [stated](#) that Hong Kong is currently in an era of “depoliticization” (去政治化) and “economification” (經濟化). The policies of the Special Administrative Region government focused only on the economy, and even seemingly unrelated initiatives like heritage conservation were contextualized in market terms, using profits in the tourism industry as an incentive. It is not difficult to observe how economy has been systematically prioritized over politics on a day to day basis. The result? Politics as a whole has been demonized as something that will “affect the stability of society.”

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Political philosopher Hannah Arendt, for one, split human activities into three spheres: labor, work, and action. Labor and work refer to hunter-gatherer regimes of survival and sustenance, as well as artistic and technical activities that help make this world livable, while action encompasses human interaction, such as discourse, rhetoric, and practice. Hui sees Arendt's construct of labor as economification, work as a form and process toward managerialism, and action as public participation in politics. Hongkongers today have been filed down to mere cogs in this mechanism of labor, alienated from action to grease the wheels of economification. What has followed is nothing short of the disappearance of mass politics. Ensconced in the world of labor and work, Hongkongers are reduced to individual units and alienated from the realm of organized action.

Depoliticization and repression in the colonial and postcolonial eras have left the labor movement in a weakened state. Shunning collective action, many Hongkongers interact with politics without an awareness and intentionality beyond seeing strike action as purely a means to an end, a tactic with no ideology. The incompleteness of this political consciousness has done much to temper the energy for strike action.

Joining trade unions or other political organizations, however, are actions that expand the public sphere and create opportunities for like-minded people to connect—necessary prerequisites for an organized, long-term struggle. This is especially important for strikers because any participation would impact not only workers themselves but also their families; outreach and political education need to involve every single participant in a more comprehensive way. The [student strikes of Quebec](#) were successful only because organizers took two years to reach out to every student on campus to discuss their hardships and articulate their asks. Without sufficient time for preparation, how can a strike succeed? Given the barriers of political participation Hongkongers have long been facing, it is no wonder that a bunch of individuals calling for strikes on their own with scarcely any preparation and organization would have resulted in failure.

Against the cruelties of colonization, Hongkongers must liberate themselves

After the Umbrella Revolution, the anti-extradition bill movement once again destroyed the idea of Hong Kong as a single-mindedly economically driven city. Its participants have written a new chapter in the city's unfolding history of public politics. The [failure of the strikes](#) cannot be simplistically understood as personal moral and political shortcomings, but a deep erosion of union power and class consciousness founded upon restrictive structures of colonial control.

"Liberate Hong Kong, The Revolution of Our Times" is [not just any chant](#); it is an idea rooted in a decolonial politics. This "revolution of our times" should take the next step to untether the humanity of the Hongkonger from the instincts and motives of economification, while people reenter the public arena of politics to connect with and organize with one another. Let's solve our problems together in a revolution that no longer shies away from political consciousness.

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P.S.

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