

Hong Kong's Lost Generation

What does it mean to grow up fighting a superpower?

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Hong Kong—Going into her last year of high school in Hong Kong, Joy thought she had her future figured out. Driven by a desire to protect others, she wanted to become a police officer. It would have been a good life. Citizens would respectfully address her with the English word “Madam”—a holdover from the British colonial days—and she would enjoy regular promotions and pay raises for patrolling one of the world’s safest cities.

But as she watched police launch tear gas and fire rubber bullets at protesters outside the city’s legislature in June, the respect and admiration the force had built up over decades vanished. In the three months since, pro-democracy protests have engulfed Hong Kong, leading to increasingly violent clashes and accusations of police brutality.

For the first time on October 1, an officer shot a protester, an 18-year-old high school student. A video showed a policeman firing live ammunition at a black-clad demonstrator in the chest at close range. The teen, according to the police, was taken to the hospital and arrested.

“With the roles that the police have now in Hong Kong, they are no longer protecting Hong Kong people,” the 18-year-old student said. *“When I see a police officer, I’m scared.”*

Police and government actions have transformed a generation of young people into activists and antagonists

Hong Kong’s youth are rallying around the protest movement. Police and government actions have transformed a generation of young people into activists and antagonists who will plague Beijing’s increasingly heavy-handed rule over the city, possibly for decades into the future.

“While the future is dark, I also feel that there is hope for Hong Kong people, because we all have a common goal now,” Joy said, referring to a new sense of purpose fighting against the government. The demonstrations, which have seen three marches of over 1 million people, were sparked by proposed legislation that would allow suspects to be extradited to mainland China and other countries, but has morphed into calls for democracy and police accountability.

Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam announced that she would withdraw the bill on September 4, but the move has not quelled acts of defiance. While the authorities hoped the start of the school year in September would see students trade marches for study groups, graffiti scrawled on the government headquarters told a different story, *“Give me back my summer holiday. Even though school has*

started, I'll still come out [to protest]."

After-school sports, tutoring classes, and video games have been replaced with braving clouds of tear gas, studying gas mask manuals, and staging impromptu gatherings to chant slogans and sing "Glory to Hong Kong," the unofficial anthem of the movement.\

Even primary school students are getting involved

One 10-year-old interviewed by local media filmed a protest near his house specifically for children his age, explaining: *"I want to show the situation to the students in primary school because many of them don't watch the news, just YouTube."*

Police have arrested people as young as 12, and at least 43 of the nearly 1,500 arrests have been people younger than 16, although police declined to provide figures for those under 18. The police have also removed at least three teenagers from their families and sent to juvenile detention facility after they were detained .

Lawmakers in Hong Kong have accused the security forces of deliberately targeting young people for arrest, especially those wearing black clothing, which has become associated with anti-government protesters.

"It appeared being young and wearing black have become an original sin," Claudia Mo, a pro-democracy legislator, said at a press conference in September.

But for many of the city's youth, their resolve was not always so intense. Before the protests Joy had only a passing interest in politics. She spent her weekends shopping with friends in one of Hong Kong's countless malls.

Those days feel like another life. Now her usual weekend routine involves marching in protests, and when she does stay home, she follows events closely through shaky cell phone livestreams. She can sum up her opinion of the city's officialdom in just four words, *"The government is trash."*

Even if Joy wanted to escape the city's divisive politics and bury herself in homework, that is no longer always possible. Her school sits North Point, a neighborhood that has been the site of several violent clashes between residents, mostly immigrants from mainland China, and protesters.

The most recent violence in September prompted the school to warn students against walking to a nearby subway station alone for fear of being attacked by pro-China thugs . Students are easily recognizable in Hong Kong by their uniforms, and at Joy's school, girls wear crisp white dresses with an embroidered school crest, with boys wearing white shirts, grey slacks and a school tie. One student in the neighborhood recently walked carrying a sign that read, "I'm just going to school, please don't beat me."

Resistance

Beijing has long sought to shape Hong Kong's youth from a very young age, hoping to indoctrinate them and instill a sense of national pride. But those efforts have largely backfired. In 2012, a planned national education curriculum, which praised China's Communist Party and denounced democracy, spurred the city's best known activist, Joshua Wong, to found the student group **Scholarism**, pass out leaflets, and organize marches of over 100,000 people when he was 15 years old.

Five years ago during the last major round of pro-democracy protests, known as the **Umbrella Movement**, demonstrators blocked the main thoroughfares outside the Hong Kong government's

main office for nearly three months. During that time, it was common to see children in their school uniforms walking along the empty highway. There was even a makeshift study area, replete with hastily built wooden desks and a lighting system powered by an exercise bike.

Many of those on the front lines in this year's protests would have been in high school then, and witnessed the failures of peaceful civil disobedience. Much of the younger

generation under 25 now favors a more confrontational, and sometimes violent, approach.

"We tried peaceful protests, we had 2 million people march and the government still didn't listen. They showed us peaceful protests are pointless," Jorji, 21, said reflecting a common sentiment among those who take to the streets.

Kids from almost every school are keen to organize mini-demonstrations to keep pressure on the government. At a shopping mall in the working-class neighborhood of Lok Fu, hundreds of students recently belted out the movement's newest anti-police song, set to the tune of Sia's "Chandelier." The students, most still in their school uniforms, filled three stories of the mall. They circled a central atrium, turned on the flash of their cell phones and sang, "Die corrupt cops. They don't take responsibility. They don't study," relishing the last line in particular. Just a few steps away, an arcade normally thronging with kids sat empty.

One of the organizers of the rally was Lukas, a 16-year-old wearing a black neck gaiter pulled up over his nose to hide his face and a gas mask slung around his neck. He had stuck a Post-It note over the crest on his school uniform, a sign of the deep sense of paranoia about displaying anything that could reveal his identity.

Before the protests he said he never thought about politics, and spent most of his free time playing volleyball or basketball. Now he's activist who admires those on the front line. Many high school students said they look up to the hardened black-clad protesters facing off against police as heroes. *"I want to see a more fair and just society, not one where the government and police can be so violent to the people,"* he said. *"The protests have created a bigger political awareness among young people about what it means to live in a just society."*

The demonstrations have given Lukas a sense of purpose, and he now wants to be a social worker after witnessing countless friends struggle with mental health issues caused by the unrest. But that sense of purpose has come at the expense of a carefree childhood. When he leaves the house on the weekends, usually to go to the protest, he shares his live location with his parents on WhatsApp so they can track his movements in case he's arrested or injured.

"There's a sense of hopelessness among us teenagers, and a lot of people have thoughts of suicide," he said. *"It's really easy to give up and lose all hope, and that's the darkest part."*

Growing mental health crisis

The growing mental health crisis has alarmed experts. At least eight suicides have been linked to the protests, with some writing notes with anti-government slogans before jumping to their deaths.

"When these kids see 2 million people march in the streets, when they risk their lives for their future and there is no government response, they become frustrated and that leads to despair," said Clarence Tsang, executive director of the suicide prevention and counseling group the Samaritan Befrienders. *"The government and police need to start repairing trust with the young generation, otherwise it will affect society for the next 50 years."*

Tsang described the conflict as the biggest single mental health crisis he has seen, and laments that most young people do not feel like they can talk to adults about their problems. His organization sent social workers to earlier protests, but was forced to stop after a volunteer from another group

was arrested. They have since set up a dedicated channel on the chat app Telegram, favored by the protesters, for those seeking help.

“Children who grow up despising the government will then teach their children the same thing,” he added. *“With such deeply rooted mistrust, Hong Kong will never have order, and we will cease to develop as a society.”*

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