

A Colour-Blind Resistance: How did South Asian Protesters Recover Their Hongkonger Identity?

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When Carrie Lam ran for Chief Executive, her slogan was “*We Connect.*” Four months into the anti-extradition movement, the slogan has been fulfilled through volleys of tear gas, under the “Lennon Walls,” across windows in apartments, beyond phone screens, between Hongkongers of different skin colours; in blood, sweat, and tears.

When the convenor of the Civil Human Rights Front (CHRF), **Jimmy Sham, was assaulted for a second time in two months**, it has been reported that the assailants were South Asians. <https://www.hongkongfp.com/2019/10/16/breaking-hong-kong-protest-leader-jimmy-sham-attacked-tai-kok-tsui/>

Some netizens threatened to vandalise mosques and Chungking Mansions. Many shops moved away their stocks while some ethnic minorities members didn't dare leave home for fear of their own safety.

Meanwhile, posters in Urdu and Nepalese appeared on the online forum LIHKG, calling on protesters to protect the mosques and stressing the non-racial nature of the Hongkonger identity. **Some South Asian “fellows” in the movement say they will offer “water, smiles, and a South Asian-style welcome” to their ethnic Chinese counterparts during the “Kowloon March” on Oct. 20.**

Two South Asian fellows, Ah-Ng and F are both “valiant” [1] protesters on the frontline. Ah-Ng was even arrested. Their stories are a testament to how ethnic minorities “We Connect” with the ethnic Chinese anew over the course of this protest movement, and recover their identity as “Hongkongers”. As the protesters say, “We advance and retreat as one, Hongkongers add oil !”

Connecting at the frontline: I am a Hongkonger

F : a Nepalese, born and raised in Hong Kong, who speaks Cantonese

“I remember this very well, a ‘fellow’ asked me once if I needed water. I was wearing a mask. I thought, I’m a Nepalese, weren’t you scared of me? You even spoke to me in Cantonese, how could you be so friendly?”

I was somewhat taken aback because I was being treated like family, like a friend. I didn’t know that

so long as your heart is with Hong Kong, then you're a Hongkonger."

A knot in F's heart has been untied. *"I feel accepted, which gives me the strength to identify myself as a Hongkonger."*

In primary school, an ethnic Chinese classmate told F: *"Why don't you go back to your own country? You're not welcome here."* F, born and raised in Hong Kong, who speaks Cantonese, hasn't dared to call himself a Hongkonger since then.

Ah-Ng : born and raised in Hong Kong

For Ah-Ng, what he fears the most isn't tear gas, but communicating in Cantonese. *"Although I can speak the language, I really don't feel confident. I didn't feel I belong here. I don't feel like a Hongkonger, that's because I was discriminated against as a kid."*

Having lived under the shade of racism for years, F was no less unsettled even with the hardhat and face mask he put on, which concealed his identity. *"As a member of ethnic minorities, deep down, I always think I'm a second-class citizen because of my darker skin. That's just a feeling, which perhaps explains why I was surprised that, wow, they treated me as one of them...! I'd forgotten that I was all wrapped up."*

"In the past, I was always very afraid and reluctant to say it, but in my heart, I actually see myself as a Hongkonger."

F positions himself somewhere between a "valiant" and a "peaceful, rational, non-violent, PNR" (1) protester. He helps pass along supplies to the frontline, set up barricades, and uses his umbrella to cover for the fellows who are making the "magic potion" (petrol bombs). F feels a strong sense of unity with other fellows on the frontline.

Ah-Ng admits that he hadn't thought of himself as a Hongkonger until he was arrested. *"A lot of South Asians had unpleasant memories as kids, which make us feel distanced from the ethnic Chinese. But after my arrest, I can feel Hongkongers' love. I'm proud to say I'm a Hongkonger."* Ah-Ng described it as *"drowning in love"*. Ah-Ng was arrested by the "raptors" (a nickname for the Special Tactical Squad). As a penniless student, Ah-Ng couldn't afford a HK\$3,000 bail. An ethnic Chinese "fellow" who had also been arrested asked Ah-Ng if his family would pick him up. He shook his head.

Then came a swift response. *"No problem, I'll ask my father to come pick me up and pay for your bail too!"*

The generosity of a stranger moved Ah-Ng deeply. *"Goodness me, we're talking about HK\$3,000! I don't know if that's a lot for him, but the thing is I'm just a total stranger to him."*

After Ah-Ng was released on bail, he didn't have money to eat meals. His friend got in touch with an ethnic Chinese "parent" (3). *"They didn't know me at all, but still shoved me a few thousand dollars for emergency. I promised to pay them back when I can."*

Doing my part for the frontliners

Ah-Ng is almost always on the frontline when there's a protest these days. But on the day of his arrest, he was only planning to be a PRN protester in the rear. He had only brought goggles with him.

Ah-Ng has been out "dreaming" (4) since July. As the number of arrests mounted, he had a premonition. That day, he had planned to walk with others at the back. *"I didn't carry any gear with me on purpose in case the police used it as evidence against me."*

The turning point came when the police fired tear gas. The protesters at the back dispersed. *"Seeing the 'valiant' protesters were left all alone, I grabbed my goggles and sprinted to the front."*

Withstanding the excruciating pain in his eyes, Ah-Ng ran ahead. Then the "raptors" swarmed and

arrested Ah-Ng and others.

"All I wanted was to help those at the front." His sympathy for the frontline protesters led to his first taste of tear gas.

F admits that he had known nothing about the Umbrella Movement. He only started following local politics after making many ethnic Chinese friends. When protesters stormed the Legislative Council, F was standing across the road. *"I was amused and curious about what was going on."*

For F too, the decisive moment came when the police fired tear gas and people took flight. *"I saw a lot of protesters suffering. I couldn't just stand by and do nothing."*

A thought crossed F's mind, who used to be a staunch PRN protester. *"My ancestors are Gurkhas! I must pluck up my courage and stand in to fill the gaps. So, I dashed to the place where people fled."*

F grabbed some cling film, wrapped himself up, then dashed to the front with not a moment of hesitation. *"I wanted to let the 'valiant' protesters know that there are people behind them. They need not be afraid!"*

That evening after he got home, F cried his eyes out. *"For the first time, I realised that the government was trying to suppress us using white terror."*

It's been said that Hong Kong is the first battle line against the Chinese Communist Party's global expansionism. On a recent state visit to Nepal, President Xi Jinping hoped to reach an extradition agreement, but the Nepalese turned it down. Had the two countries signed an extradition agreement, then the Tibetans in exile there will be in grave danger. *"Why does the Chinese government have to stick their nose into the two places I call home? What's happening in Hong Kong matters to the whole world."* F is enraged.

Taking greater risks

F and Ah-Ng are both born and raised in Hong Kong. Quite a lot of their friends follow the political movement closely. Just as the ethnic Chinese, most of their South Asian friends are PRN.

Ethnic minorities bear a much higher risk than their ethnic Chinese counterparts to participate in local politics because they're fearful of dragging down the whole community.

When Ah-Ng got arrested, his family was on top of his mind, rather than himself.

"If the police really conduct house searches and bother my family, my family don't even speak Cantonese or English - they may not even know what their basic rights are. What am I to do then?"

Many ethnic minorities in Hong Kong live with the fear of being uprooted and chased out of their homes.

F's parents are first-generation immigrants to Hong Kong. *"The first generation is very cautious. They were victims of the Maoists during the Nepalese Civil War, so they know what Xi Jinping is up to. Also, because of Bhutan's expulsion of the Nepalese community, many in my parent's generation believe that it's better to keep our heads low. Although they don't like it this way, but there's only so much we can do. In 1996, the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) launched an insurgency in a bid to overthrow the Nepalese monarchy. In 2006, the Maoist insurgents signed a truce with the government. Nearly 16,000 people were killed. The incumbent president, Bidhya Devi Bhandari, is from the Communist Party of Nepal - which is a merger between CPN-M and the other communist party."*

In late 1980s, over 100,000 Lhotshampas (Bhutanese of Nepalese descent) were forced out of Bhutan by the government. Many fled to Nepal. "Neither Nepal nor Bhutan claim responsibility for the Lhotshampa refugees. I'm frightened of the possibility of my family and I being deported if I were arrested."

Most of F's friends only go to police-sanctioned rallies because of that fear. Nevertheless, they will make flyers and posters about the movement in Nepali and English to show their support. When faced with the police, ethnic minorities incur additional risks. It was reported that a 16-year-old Vietnamese student had complained about being forced to sing "May Glory to Hong Kong Police." The police terrorised him, saying: *"I hate Vietnamese people the most. The judges also hate Vietnamese people the most, so you'll get a heavier sentence."*

Phyllis Cheun from Unison

[Hong Kong Unison is one of the few local NGOs fighting for the rights of minority groups] As Phyllis Cheung, executive director of Hong Kong Unison points out, amongst all the anti-discrimination ordinances in Hong Kong, only the Race Discrimination Ordinance lacks the provisions that would prevent police officers from being discriminatory when discharging their duties or exercising their power.

"This means, even for those minorities who know their rights, they understand that it's futile to complain about discrimination when they're stopped to have their ID card checked or when they're under arrest. Equal Opportunity Commission can't help them.

So, they stay silent. If they want accountability from the police, they can only employ lawyers to do so through the Hong Kong Bill of Rights. But that means a pricey bill to pay."

Ah-Chai, a social worker member of an ethnic minority

"We are Hongkongers too. We really want to stand up for Hong Kong, but we have to be even bolder, because the risks are higher," says Ah-Chai, a social worker who is a member of an ethnic minority.

He adds that getting arrested at a protest and having a criminal record *"make things even harder for us than the ethnic Chinese. Getting a job is challenging enough for ethnic minorities as it is, and social circles among different minorities are extremely close-knit.*

"Once arrested, the whole community knows. If you are arrested for a political reason, then you'll be labelled as an anti- government troublemaker, which is even worse."

As Ah-Chai explains, when ethnic minorities walk around on the streets, they *"look different from everyone else,"* which makes it easy for people to single them out as a target.

Besides the risk of arrest, there is an instinctive vigilance and caution within ethnic minority communities, because of years of being discriminated against. It is a mentality of being a marginal group in society.

Fermi Wong, founder of Hong Kong Unison

"It's a fear remote from the experience of the predominant social group," says Fermi Wong, founder of Hong Kong Unison.

The political spectrum of the ethnic minorities resembles that of the ethnic Chinese community;

- the senior citizens tend to be more conservative,
- whilst the younger generations are more open-minded.
- As for the newly immigrated, they'd think: *"We are the minority here, which makes us more vulnerable than the ethnic Chinese if we get involved in political movements,"* Ms. Wong said.

A lot of Ah-Ng's senior relatives are apprehensive that his whole family might get deported, if any one of them was arrested.

After the white-mob's attack in Yuen Long on July 21, there were online appeals to ethnic minorities asking them not to become killer-for-hire. Circulating in ethnic minorities' WhatsApp groups, these appeals were translated into some seven or eight languages, including Urdu, Nepalese, by

volunteers.

- *"The ethnic minority groups themselves were very afraid of being stigmatised for a single wrongdoing of a black sheep in the community,"* Ms. Cheung said. - Ah-Chai agrees, saying: *"The attack on Jimmy Sham this time was said to be done by five South Asians, but the whole community was affected."*

- Ms. Wong thinks the assault on Mr. Sham is probably done by thugs-for-hire, like the Yuen Long white-mob attack on July 2.

"Hiring Chinese or South Asians (for the attacks) are both evil, but hiring South Asians provokes an extra element of ethical and religious hatred. From what I can see, LIHKG users seemed very sensible. They asked people to protect the mosques," Ms. Wong said.

- To be respectful of Muslim culture, some on LIHKG even asked protesters not to show posters which featured the mascots of the forum - LIHKG pigs and LIHKG dogs- near mosques.

- Ms. Cheung also points out that an increasing number of campaign materials were written in English, Urdu, Hindi, Punjabi, and Nepalese.

A panic gripped the ethnic minorities after Mr. Sham was attacked. On Oct. 19, some shops in Chungking Mansions stored their stocks away. The Kowloon Masjid and Islamic Centre truncated their opening hours from full day to three specific times for prayers (Muslims pray five times a day). *"Rumours say not only would shops and mosques be targeted, but people would also be attacked. So old people stayed home because of safety and traffic."*

Fake news abounded, some earlier ones even said that the People's Liberation Army had been deployed. Many people who don't speak Chinese or English struggled to tell facts from fictions," Ms. Cheung said.

A family 'connected' after an arrest

Following the attack on Mr. Sham and arrests, the ethnic minorities are in turn paying more attention to the movement.

Ah-Ng's family has mixed feelings towards his arrest. While some admire his courage, *"there are relatives who think I was being silly. They say Hong Kong is such a nice place, why get yourself into trouble?"* But he noticed that his arrest triggered a shift of attitude in his community.

Ah-Ng's family knows that he always went out to "dream". At first, they didn't believe that the police had been abusing their power. Some of his senior relatives reckoned that *"the police were simply doing the right thing."* But now they'll ask Ah-Ng about *"the weekly protest schedule."*

"For one thing, they're heartbroken by what had happened to me. Also, when I tell them my experience, they'll say 'How can the police treat you like that?'"

Getting the South Asian community involved

When it comes to the rumour of mosques being the target of retaliation, Ah-Ng dismissed it with a smile. *"They've never discriminated against us in this movement. On the contrary, they want to approach us."*

"There has been a breakthrough between ethnic Chinese and the ethnic minorities because of the movement. Before, neither side made an effort to learn about the other's culture. But this time, I can see the ethnic Chinese really try very hard to get us involved," Ah-Ng said.

He noticed a lot of people on LIHKG calling for a platform for English-language campaign materials. *"These efforts can definitely engage us, especially the English information on Twitter and Instagram."*

They're very up-to-date."

Talking about discrimination, F thinks MTR's recent suggestion to hire former Gurkha soldiers to enforce the MTR by-laws is racist.

<https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/3027269/mtr-chief-jacob-kam-takes-heat-plan-use-gurkhas-railway>

Jacob Kam Chak-Pui, the CEO of the MTR, explained that since the Nepalese didn't understand Cantonese, they won't get emotional when people shout expletives at them, thus lowering the chance of a conflict. *"This is really offensive. This is stereotyping,"* F said.

There were talks of forming human chains outside of mosques on the day of the protest. F is touched. *"They know that some ethnic minorities support them. Of course, there're black sheep, but they won't blame us for that, because they understand,"* F said.

In defiance of political terror, ethnic minorities have been participating in every police-sanctioned rally since June. *"Ever since 2003, ethnic minorities, especially the youngsters, have never been absent in marches,"* said Hong Kong Unison's Ms. Wong. *"Given that the South Asian community takes up only 2% of the population, this is truly remarkable."*

"Hong Kong is my home. Our parent's generation will call India and Pakistan their home. But my friends will say their home is in Hung Hom or To Kwa Wan. We belong to Hong Kong because we have a personal future here," Ah-Chai said. The older generations aren't very supportive of the protests, linking it with troublemaking and disrupting social order. The younger generations who are educated in Hong Kong have a different view.

"We understand how special Hong Kong is because there is freedom of speech. If the ethnic Chinese lose their civil rights, we will lose our rights too," Ah-Chai said. When ethnic minorities take part in PRN marches, some ethnic Chinese thank them for their support. *"They'll find this odd, why are people thanking them. They'll reply, saying 'We're Hongkongers too! Hongkongers, add oil!' They'll chant slogans along with the ethnic Chinese."*

Four months into the movement, the ethnic Chinese no longer find it strange when they see ethnic minorities in marches.

"We help each other. We are connected," Ah-Chai said.

As the "Kowloon March" on Oct. 20 wasn't sanctioned by the police, a lot of Ah-Chai's friends didn't want to take risks. But quite a few of them handed out bottled water at the entrance of Chungking Mansions to show solidarity with their ethnic Chinese fellows.

"No matter where you're born, so long as you love Hong Kong, you're a Hongkonger. So, we need to stand together, as Hongkongers," Ah-Chai said.

Footnotes:

The pro-democracy protesters can be broadly divided into two types:

(1) **"Peaceful, Rational and Non-Violent" (PRN)** refers to those who eschew violent forms of political expressions.

(2) **"Valiant"** protesters are their more radical counterparts, who are more ready to use force. They gear up with respirator masks, goggles, and hardhats, whilst "PRN" protesters usually only wear a face mask.

[3] **"Parent"** is a coded word for typically older, middle-class Hongkongers who support the young protesters by providing transportation or financial help.

[4] **“Dreaming”** is a coded word for joining non-police-sanctioned protest. It is widely used amongst netizens when discussing their tactics or experience of protest. It is intended to serve as a disclaimer, so that what netizens say online could not be taken as incriminating evidence by the police.

Humans of Hong Kong - Translated version of feature stories and interviews by Stand News.

P.S.

<https://thestandnews.com/politics/a-colour-blind-resistance-how-did-south-asian-protesters-recover-their-hongkonger-identity/>