

2019 Movement, Winter Coronavirus – Is Hong Kong’s springtime coming?

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“It’s a self-determination movement more than anything else. Hongkongers have been treated as pawns, first by British colonial rule then by Chinese colonial rule. Nobody has ever stopped to ask us, ‘What do YOU want?’ That’s such a basic thing, wanting a say in your own future. Never had it here. Hong Kong was never British, despite being a British colony. It has never been Chinese either, despite being geographically and now politically linked to them. It’s fundamentally always been just Hong Kong. It is its own place, with its own unique identity, and the people here would very much like to be able to keep that, preserve that and expand that – and to stop having the rules of their existence defined for them, and imposed upon them. Hong Kong people have their own voice, and want it heard.”

– Hong Kong democracy activist and citizen journalist

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Barricades are up again at Hong Kong Polytechnic University. But unlike last November, during an intense occupation at the height of the city’s extraordinary democratic rebellion, there’s hardly a student in sight. The administration has taken control of PolyU, which is in an extended shutdown because of the coronavirus panic. At the main entrance on Cheong Wan Road, weighted five-foot-high yellow linked dividers run along the side of the building. The formerly paved footpaths, dug up by radicals for the bricks to be used as projectiles, are concreted and asphalted. Electronic gates like those at metro stations have been installed at the bottom of the stairs leading into the campus. Half a dozen security guards monitor everyone coming and going. When classes resume, anyone without a student or staff swipe card will have to register to gain entry.

Last year, when the police laid siege here, at the top of the entrance stairs to the left was a makeshift clinic run by students and their supporters. Medics carried in a steady stream of activists suffering from tear gas inhalation and rubber bullet wounds inflicted by the hated police. Today there’s a new makeshift clinic, but it’s set up by the administration to test temperatures and screen people for the dreaded virus. Last year, the government was attempting to ban face masks, which protesters used to protect their identities. Now, the university has posters instructing people to “Wear Mask Properly” so no-one gets sneezed on. The cafeteria back then was a hive of communal activity, free food donated by supporters and cooked by volunteers being distributed 24/7. It was a ramshackle mess of supplies, solidarity and people falling asleep on their feet. Today it’s sanitised, which isn’t so bad. But commerce has triumphed over the collective spirit; there is a new queue system leading to automated ordering stations for drinks – the ultimate in individualised efficiency, in which you need not interact with a soul to get what you pay for.

Graffitied bollards have been wrapped in grey canvas, the walls and ground washed of paint, and the garden beds, previously trampled and stacked with bricks and petrol bombs, hastily reconstructed. On notice boards and tied overhead between the supporting poles of a prominent walkway, bright “Good Seed” advertisements offer HK\$200,000 in funding to kick start social projects. It’s an administration initiative, backed by an array of NGOs and corporates, to “INSPIRE, ENABLE and

EMPOWER social innovation projects” and encourage returning students to “Be Creative to Change the World!” It’s a reminder that while administrators and HR professionals from every continent talk a lot about diversity and cultural exchange, in the end they all speak the same language. You could be standing in any university on the planet reading the same catchphrases in Swahili, Arabic or Spanish written by the same people saying the same things to encourage students to pursue respectable self-advancement under the guise of social responsibility. No doubt there will be the usual social-climbers clamoring to get some of the cash, along with a nice tick on their curriculum vitae. But thousands who participated in the street clashes and occupations last year will see through it.

There are reminders of the heroic occupation. Some campus entrances remain closed because of the damage caused when students torched barricades to hold off the cops. The student union noticeboards near the registrar’s office are full of undisturbed propaganda. In the meeting room on the second level of the union building, a garbage bag full of helmets sits on the table. Next to it is a bag of eye washes for flushing tear gas. A pile of banners is in the far corner near another bag, this one full of gas masks. And of course, there’s an umbrella here and there. Some of the offices are open and full of materials and supplies. Two vending machines, smashed and grabbed, have been neither refilled nor refitted. There’s not a person around. Amid the virus panic, it feels like one of those zombie apocalypse films, like nothing here has been touched for months, everything left as it was by a sudden catastrophe.

It’s a similar story at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Razor wire surrounds the MTR station servicing the campus, which was almost completely destroyed by students in November and is now covered in tin and tarps, presumably awaiting refurbishment. A dozen security guards check the IDs of everyone arriving. Heading north toward the Number 2 Bridge, the embankment between the rail lines and Sea Side Drive is strewn with damaged umbrellas. The bridge passes over the Tolo Highway and was the most important strategic site on campus when the students decided to halt the traffic underneath – their contribution to an immense effort to shut down the city to secure democratic rights. Today, there is a guard post in front and the structure is barricaded. Only one entrance to the entire sprawling campus is open to traffic. Half a dozen buses, which had been commandeered by students during the occupation, have been fenced off and the graffiti on them sprayed over. But plenty is still visible elsewhere around the grounds. “The history will NEVER forget”, “They give us corruption, we give them revolution”, “Live free or die trying”, “Free HK” and the V is for vendetta insignia.

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Au Loong Yu is keeping his distance in a small pagoda in a Tuen Mun park in the New Territories. Hong Kong is one of the most densely populated cities in the world, almost everyone literally living on top of one another in huge, cramped high rise apartment blocks. With an aggressive infection such as this coronavirus, a single carrier undetected in public housing could quickly lead to an outbreak. He has a few extra medical face masks and gives one to a homeless person as we get up and walk. Between explaining the political and market failures that have left an old man to fill the sanitation gaps exposed by an incompetent and unprepared government, the veteran activist turns his thoughts to last year’s revolt:

“The movement of 2019, the momentum, has been declining obviously. You can see a lot of symptoms. The Lennon Walls [where people stick post-it notes with messages of support for protests, general slogans of the movement and other pithy commentary] – there are fewer updates. And for a long time, several months now, there has not been people shouting slogans from their own apartment and getting the slogan echoed by people in other apartments. It used to happen every night at 10 o’clock, but that has long passed. Maybe two months before the outbreak of the

university occupations this type of activity had already died down. The students tried to save the movement. They came up with the brilliant plan of blocking roads, stopping transport and making people strike. But not being able to get to work – this is not the proper way to go on strike.”

There is a broad consensus here that when police relentlessly turned the screws, the movement could no longer continue in the same way. The state’s firepower was too great. People grew tired and, while there wasn’t mass demoralisation, the accumulation of defeats and the evacuation of the university occupations took a toll. More than 7,000 people were arrested, perhaps one-third of them under the age of 18. One thousand have been charged; the nearly 6,000 bailed are subject to curfews, reporting requirements and/or restrictions on their movement. “There were so many arrests – these were often frontliners and more radical protesters, especially at PolyU”, a young activist says on Hong Kong Island. “Since then, police have started shutting things down quickly. The big confrontations were organised on the spot during the events, not beforehand. With things shut down more quickly and more violently, people don’t have time to organise themselves. And the regular protesters are more intimidated.” Another activist, a citizen journalist who goes by the name of Hong Kong Hermit to maintain anonymity, draws out the longer picture of shifting police tactics:

“There’s been a constant sense of escalation over the last few months. Currently, even the big peaceful marches get hassled before they begin. Then, once they start, they get attacked by undercover cops rushing in to tackle a couple of people. Riot cops pepper spray dozens, there’s a little tickle of tear gas, the march is cancelled and everyone is hassled on the way home. And that’s for the processions where there are babies and families present.

“In the beginning [i.e. eight months ago], the marches would go until 5pm or 7pm, then the frontliners would take over and cause malarkey until midnight. Then, the teargassing started before sunset and frontliners would go on until the last train. Then, with the MTR [Mass Transit Railway, Hong Kong’s metro train system] moving from being neutral to being a military transport for the cops, and a staging ground from where they could launch attacks, the actions became smaller and more localised as we couldn’t redeploy. The late night actions were all around residential areas that the cops then started to invade and cause hassle in people’s home estates. Shopping malls for daytime protests were the next step. Police routinely invaded those too, beating people senseless. Ultimately, people ran out of safe places to gather and protest even peacefully, as the cops have attacked everyone, everywhere, and with little reason or warning.”

The tremendous strength of the movement last year was its spontaneous character. Unlike the much-celebrated (at least by naive journalists) “leaderless” movements in the West, in which leaderlessness, ironically, is often a catchphrase used by activist-bureaucrats intent on strictly controlling events by labelling any proposal they don’t like as a sinister attempt to assert leadership, Hong Kong’s leaderless uprising was truly that. But its weaknesses are perhaps starting to show in the face of the repression. The government lacks popular legitimacy; incapable of persuasion, it has only violence at its disposal. Yet, at least for the time being, the opposition has little co-ordination and no obvious answer to the disorganisation that the repression is causing.

However, two activists I speak to believe that, contrary to appearances, the movement is not retreating. Each says that it has consciously downed tools, so to speak, to rest, regroup and wait for the virus threat to pass. They have no doubt that another political offensive is coming. Time will tell. There are still protests almost every day about the government’s response to the coronavirus, or its attempts to open quarantine stations in or near public housing estates. While they are generally small, they have occurred in far flung areas of the territory previously untouched by mobilisations. One thing that seems clear is that the level of anti-government anger continues to rise – something you would have thought impossible last November when resentment was ubiquitous and seemingly peaking. A Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute survey in late January found 75 percent of

respondents dissatisfied with the government's response to the outbreak. Chief executive Carrie Lam's support rating has sunk to 21 percent, the lowest on record for any leader.

"[The movement has] not given up in any way. It is just a combination of the virus, and frankly everyone is fucking exhausted", says the Hermit. "Every time there has been a chance for people to show where they stand, they have consistently shown they stand with the frontliners ... The larger protests will resume in the warmer weather, once the virus emergency passes. Just small wildcat events until then, to keep them aware that this isn't over."

While there are different takes on how precisely to characterise the current period, and how much action we can expect in the coming months, one thing everyone seems to agree on is that, all things being equal, the annual 1 July demonstration (marking the date of Hong Kong's handover from Britain to China) this year will be a huge display of democratic opposition to the government and to Beijing.

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"I'm not yet 30 years old and I have a second chance - who gets that?" Leo can't quite believe that 2019 came so soon after 2014. That year's Umbrella Movement was the first radicalisation of a generation whose political existence has been framed by the reversion of Hong Kong to Chinese rule. For 10 weeks, thousands of students occupied different sections of Hong Kong Island demanding universal suffrage. But it ended badly: repression, imprisonment or exile for almost all the key movement leaders. Many participants gave up hope. But now there's a second coming. And as a labour organiser, researcher and trainer with the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions, Leo notices the terrain shifting.

Of particular interest is the spike in union registrations. According to the Labour Department, 17 new unions were formed from October until the end of last year. Leo says the real number is about 50, but most haven't finished the paperwork to be formally registered. There are about 30,000 new members, two-thirds of whom have joined the Hospital Authority Employees Alliance, which was registered only in December but has already had a week-long strike involving up to 9,000 new members. It now covers almost one-quarter of the Hospital Authority's 80,000 employees. It's hardly a labour insurgency - you only need seven people to form a union here, a legacy of British colonialism's "kill them with kindness" attitude to the union movement, which has resulted in craft-style fracturing and weakness, with 11 federations and almost 900 individual unions in a city of 7.5 million people. But given the Hong Kong labour movement's unenviable record of civility (save a few notable exceptions), this uptick has people talking.

The general strike has become part of young Hongkongers' political imagination, Leo says. Last June, the government sent to the Legislative Council a bill that, if passed, would have allowed residents to be extradited and tried on the mainland. This was the spark lighting the fire of mobilisations throughout the rest of the year. From the beginning, the online forum LIHK was ablaze with calls for a general strike. But they weren't coming from the unions - it was the university students and high schoolers. And while the general strike that they mustered in November was a heroic, citywide display of student and youth insurrection without a working class mobilisation behind it, in the background, seeds were being planted among non-students.

Sometime in July, people started industry-based chat groups on Telegram, a popular encrypted messaging app used by most participants in the movement. "They started calling it the TG Union - the Telegram Union. We couldn't tell how many groups or how many people were involved. This form of organising is very loose. But at least it was a start", Leo says. "They started thinking about themselves as workers. This was new in the Hong Kong political movement." On 2 August, the civil

servants' TG group organised a 40,000-strong demonstration against police violence. The same day, the health workers' TG group organised a rally of 10,000. Both of those TG unions are now fully registered unions.

"Those two assemblies inspired people to think, we should do something like this in my industry", Leo says. "On 5 August there was an actual strike. It was very important. A total of maybe 350,000 people didn't go to work; big assemblies were held in seven locations. But because of the lack of core organisation, you couldn't tell how many people were protesting from each industry, how many were actually on strike, rather than just taking a sick day and things like this. The assemblies [protests] were not organised by the unions, but the young people and TG groups. People could see that the strike was powerful, but not enough – not big enough, not long enough."

There was a lot of online discussion about why the strike didn't work. The students felt that they still needed a proper general strike – so those most determined to have a citywide shutdown were the least able to carry it out. By definition, a general strike involves workers refusing to work, using their tremendous economic power to paralyse a city, or a country, and provoke a political crisis. The students went on to substitute in November by throwing themselves all over town, shutting down key arterial roads, blocking train lines, setting up barricades and fighting police. Who could blame them? If they were to wait for the grown ups to rise to their level of consciousness, they would have been waiting a long time. In fact, their militancy was an inspiration across Hong Kong. Many non-students felt ashamed that they had let the young people down. The police were raping, killing and assaulting people behind the scenes, but the students would not back down.

It was precisely at this time that the wave of new unions began registering. The Telegram channel had grown to more than 70,000 subscribers (it's more than 80,000 now) with a permanent group of people giving advice on how to join and how to form a union. "People are starting to see that getting organised is a way to put pressure on the government. Not many are joining because they are thinking first about staff rights and conditions. It's political. This is different from before", Tam Leung Yang, an organiser with two small civil servant unions, says. Leo agrees. "People are joining to fight for democracy. This is totally new. We usually start with economic questions and then later move to politicising people through education."

The new union leaders are young, generally aged 28 to 35, with very few over 40. "I would think that most were on the street in 2014", Leo says. "2009 to 2014 was the peak of social movements. We [students] experienced many different activities – a labour strike, land use disputes, high speed rail protests, high school struggles, Occupy Central in 2011, then, of course, 2014. It was a time of a lot of social movement training if you were young or a student back then. 2019 was our second chance."

Ask anyone who has made the transition from student activist to union militant, and they will be able to explain that most activist skills are transferrable, but the challenges often are significantly different. If it goes well, perhaps we may look back on this period as the birth of a new union militancy in Hong Kong. If so, that will throw up a range of new challenges, not least of which will relate to the unity of the self-determination movement. Because if workers start to move, the national question may soon become a class question.

There are always 'ifs', of course. Time will tell how this aspect of the movement progresses. Right now, for various reasons, there is a pause in the big public mobilisations. But the situation remains fluid and volatile. The virus is coming under control. High school and university classes will resume soon enough. Springtime is coming. And the rage in Hong Kong endures.

Ben Hillier

P.S.

- Red Flag. 20 February 2020:
<https://redflag.org.au/node/7030>