

Demoralised but defiant, Hong Kong's spirit of resistance endures

Tuesday 29 September 2020, by [YU Verna](#) (Date first published: 29 September 2020).

Security law has largely stamped out anti-government protests, but the opposition is finding new ways to fight

Tony Chung spends his days in fear and solitude. For the 19-year-old activist, who became the first political figure to be arrested under [Hong Kong's national security law](#), the spectre of prison looms large.

Chung was arrested in late July with three other former members of the pro-independence group Studentlocalism - which he founded at the age of 15 - on suspicion of inciting secession under the law.

As he awaits his trial for another case - the desecration of the national flag - he is unable to sleep most nights. He is afraid to go out because he worries about his safety, having been followed by unidentified people on multiple occasions.

Amid the uncertainties over the impending trial, he cannot take up a place at university like most young people his age. He has nothing to read as most of his books were taken away by the police in a house search during his arrest. He cannot travel after the authorities confiscated his passport.

"Being in prison is surely not as dreadful as the wait," he says. "I am awaiting my fate like a prisoner.

"Everything feels so different in Hong Kong now. It's unimaginable that we have political prisoners in this international metropolis," he says. "And we don't know what is going to happen next."

Chung is just one of many Hongkongers fearful for the future under the draconian new law, which has largely stamped out the anti-government movement that [rocked the city](#) last year. Among pro-democracy activists and supporters, an atmosphere of sorrow, hopelessness and pessimism has pervaded ever since. So far, at least 28 protesters and activists, including Chung, have been arrested, while more than 10,000 have been arrested since the start of the movement in June last year.

Under political pressure, Chung says he has abandoned his pro-independence position and closed his group.

"It's not realistic to push for independence," he says. "Amid these times, we should focus on what is going on now, and not something that's so far away that we can't see.

"Many people have become dispirited, but [the road to] democracy is not a matter of half a year or one year. It's a necessary stage in the path to democracy that some would shed blood, make a sacrifice, or even flee. But we need to persist. If we wallow in our misfortune, it will be more of a

tragedy. Why not protect our brothers and sisters and think about how we can carry on?"

Gone are the scenes of [1 to 2 million protesters](#) filling the thoroughfares of Hong Kong. Under the national security law and amid the [Covid-19 pandemic](#), the number of rallies and protests have dwindled.

Many of the more radical protesters who fought against the police on the streets last year have either been jailed or fled abroad. Political activists such as [Agnes Chow](#), 23, Chung and veteran pro-democracy figures such as [Jimmy Lai](#) have been arrested while Nathan Law, 27, Honcques Laus, 18, and Sunny Cheung, 24, have [escaped overseas](#).

But despite the lull, supporters vow they will keep up the spirit of resistance – albeit through lower-profile gestures.

Defiance and hidden messages

Some still turn up to smaller-scale rallies, where protesters number from a few to a few hundred – even when large numbers of police officers are deployed to swiftly arrest or search those at the scene. At shopping centres, a number of people still turn up at “lunch with you” flash mobs to sing protest songs, often holding up [blank sheets of paper](#) and shouting slogans from behind their masks. At a couple of lunchtime events in mid-September, dozens gathered at a park to read the [opposition Apple Daily newspaper](#), surrounded by police who registered their identity cards.

Chiu, a 71-year-old retired driver who only wants to use his surname, says he still turns up to as many rallies as he can. He shouts slogans when police officers’ backs are turned.

“When the enemy advances, I withdraw. When he retreats, I pursue,” he says, quoting Mao Zedong’s famous approach to guerrilla warfare. “It’s a long-term fight and we need to maintain our spirit.

“We have no means to fight them, but people like me who have experienced Communist rule will not be cowed,” says Chiu, who escaped from China to Hong Kong as a teenager after experiencing famine and political upheaval.

Expressions of discontent have also become more understated. While some show their support for the movement by patronising pro-democracy shops or restaurants, others lay flowers at a metro station where there were rumoured deaths in a confrontation last year, while some pay their respects at a graveyard where they believe those who died in the protests are buried.

“The dictatorial regime keeps suppressing us, but they cannot break us.”

- Tommy Yiu

Tommy Yiu, a small business owner, says he shows his support for the movement by providing job opportunities to former protesters.

“It’s not the end of the fight but an ongoing struggle. A lot of people have suffered mentally and we need to show our support,” he says. “The dictatorial regime keeps suppressing us, but they cannot break us.”

Gone from the streets are the anti-government banners and graffiti. Instead, people use coded language to express their grievances. The colourful sticky notes with protest slogans stuck on the [so-called “Lennon walls”](#) last year have been replaced by blank notes. New slogans proliferate in

cyberspace, parodying the theme of other slogans banned under the national security law, such as “Recover Hong Kong, Pandemic of our times” instead of the banned slogan “Liberate Hong Kong, Revolution of our times”.

Lars Laamann, a historian at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, said the “hidden messages” of resistance have a long history in China, dating back to the 13th-14th centuries in the Yuan dynasty under Mongolian rule, and were common after the 1989 crackdown of the Tiananmen pro-democracy movement, when democracy supporters inserted subtle political messages into their poetry.

Opposition politicians are also looking for new ways to express themselves. Owen Chow, a 23-year-old “localist” activist, says he wants to establish a “people’s parliament” to amalgamate the power of the opposition outside the framework of the legislative council, whose [elections have been cancelled](#) by the government.

“They can arrest one or two, but behind them, many more would still be resisting,” he says. “Hong Kong can’t give up. Even if we can no longer speak in public, we’ll pass our messages on through our mouths and ears.”

Edmund Cheng, a political scientist at the City University of Hong Kong, says even though mass mobilisation has become impossible, smaller gestures are still sustaining a level of passive resistance and it will be hard for the authorities to completely wipe out the movement.

“Hong Kong is a unique society. It has a long history of protest and exercising civil liberties, protected by the rule of law. This has been embedded in the minds of generations of Hongkongers and will still carry on despite a challenging environment,” he says.

Joseph Cheng, a retired political science professor at the City University of Hong Kong said: “The anger and frustrations are still there so the movement will not die. It will decline, but will re-emerge when opportunities emerge. People will not forget.”

Even amid deep anxiety ahead of his court trial, Chung still harbours hopes for Hong Kong.

“I have asked many times: is Hong Kong beyond help? But it’s my home, no matter what it becomes, I won’t give up on it,” he says.

“The movement might have finished, but the resistance hasn’t.”

Verna Yu

[Click here](#) to subscribe to our weekly newsletters in English and or French. You will receive one email every Monday containing links to all articles published in the last 7 days.

P.S.

The Guardian

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/29/dispriated-but-defiant-hong-kongs-spirit-of-resistance-endures>