

## Chapter 10

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# **‘If not now, then when? If not us, who?’**

## Understanding the student protest movement in Hong Kong

*Bruce Macfarlane*

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### **Introduction**

This chapter will explore the contextual, cultural and regional background underlying the student-led protests against delays to democratic reforms in Hong Kong in 2014 as part of a wider civil disobedience movement. The protests culminated in a class boycott at universities across the territory and subsequently led to the occupation of downtown areas of the city in alliance with other democratic reform groups. The demands for universal suffrage and calls for an open selection process of candidates for the territory’s leader need to be understood by reference to Hong Kong’s status as a former British colony until 1997 and, subsequently, its status as a special administrative region (SAR) of the People’s Republic of China (PRC).

The protests are also important to understand in the context of social, demographic and linguistic changes, increasing economic inequality in Hong Kong, and as part of a process of so-called ‘mainlandization’ whereby a subtle convergence is believed to be taking place between Hong Kong and mainland China (the PRC) (Lo, 2008: 42). This is the source of more widespread civil unrest and resistance in Hong Kong which has a long history of separate development and cultural identity as a result of its colonization by the British. Worries about the rapid pace of mainlandization underlie the sense of urgency and desperation to which student protests have given voice.

### **Occupy Central**

Between 26 September and 15 December 2014, the downtown area of Hong Kong was the scene of mass protests against a decision to curb electoral reforms in the appointment of the territory’s Chief Executive. Tens of thousands of demonstrators occupied large parts of the main business, government and retail districts of Hong Kong, erecting tents and blocking major road junctions. The protest took place over several months in what became known as Occupy Central or the ‘umbrella’ movement. This tag stuck after protesters used umbrellas as protective shields against the use of tear gas, pepper spray and batons by the Hong Kong police. Television screens around the world carried pictures of thousands of

protesters camped out on the streets of Hong Kong in a blaze of yellow umbrellas, T-shirts, ribbons and banners.

Despite sporadic attempts by the police and the courts to clear the streets, for 12 weeks thousands of protesters stayed out in an occupation of parts of the city forming makeshift but highly organized camp sites in the Central, Mong Kok and Causeway Bay districts of the city. The mass protests sparked the attention of the international news media and led to gridlock in downtown areas of Hong Kong. Heavy-handed police tactics allied with deep fears of a repeat of a Tiananmen Square style incident in which an unknown number of student protesters were either killed or injured in Beijing in 1989, led to calls from the public universities for their students to return to class, citing concerns about their safety.

The direct cause of the protests, in which students from Hong Kong's universities played a leading role, was a decision of the National People's Congress Standing Committee (NPCSC) of the PRC that a nominating committee should permit only two or three candidates to be presented for election within Hong Kong. The decision appeared to reverse a pledge issued by the NPCSC in 2007 that the Chief Executive of Hong Kong should be elected by universal suffrage by 2017. It was also seen as contradicting article 45 of the Basic Law of Hong Kong which entertains the prospect of universal suffrage as an eventual aim.

Between 22 and 26 September, immediately prior to the start of the mass protests, a class boycott took place in protest against the NPCSC decision involving university and some secondary school students. This was a joint action organized by the Hong Kong Federation of Students and 'Scholarism', a group representing opposition to the introduction of Moral and National Education (MNE) into the Hong Kong secondary school curriculum. They were joined on 28 September by the 'Occupy Central with Love and Peace movement', an organization founded by Benny Tai, an associate professor at the University of Hong Kong.

The protests divided opinion across Hong Kong society between those who praised the re-awakening of political consciousness among a new generation and those who regarded the actions of students, prompted by 'irresponsible' professors, as 'encouraging the naïve youth to break the law in order to bring about unrealistic political objectives' (Chin, 2014: A12). Some small, local traders and taxi drivers complained that they bore the brunt of the economic consequences of the mass protests which caused considerable disruption to the business life of the city. To some extent, although not exclusively, this division of opinion is represented as generational and linked to the Tiananmen Square massacre of 1989. The students are too young to remember this significant event while their parents' and grandparents' more conservative attitudes towards the risks associated with protest are linked to the fear of seeing another brutal crackdown on democratic expression in their lifetime. Others opposed to the student protests contended that they showed a disregard for the rule of law and that their actions demonstrated that they were 'allowing themselves to be influenced, if not used, by foreigners to try to embarrass China' (Forrai, 2014: A14). Students were characterized as part of a selfish, 'me' generation with a sense of entitlement but without responsibility for

the consequences of their actions (Wong, 2014). Some commentators also argued that the polarizing effects of the protests would only result in tighter restrictions on political and personal freedom in Hong Kong in the aftermath of events (Chugani, 2014).

### The rise of student activism

The background to these protests, and the leading role played by university students, need to be understood by reference to a range of previous incidents and protests which preceded the Occupy Central event of 2014. Many of the students who participated in the protests were either inspired by, or connected to, the ‘Scholarism’ movement founded by Joshua Wong and Ivan Lam in 2011. Scholarism was formed as a campaign group of school students opposed to the proposed introduction of MNE. The curriculum outlined sought, *inter alia*, to foster a sense of ‘national identity’ and moral values associated with good citizenship. However, it was seen by its critics as a naked vehicle for promoting pro-communist and anti-democracy views as well as diluting the local identity of Hong Kong people.

Joshua Wong, a bespectacled and scrawny-looking 14-year-old, emerged as the unlikely talisman of ‘Scholarism’ in 2011. He led a campaign against the introduction of MNE which in many ways goes to the heart of the mainlandization issue since it opposed a re-making of the identity of Hong Kong people through the school curriculum. The campaign initiated by Scholarism culminated in a mass rally in 2012 attended by an estimated 100,000 Hong Kongers, including many parents and teachers. In the wake of the protests the Hong Kong government announced a postponement to the introduction of MNE. This event was significant in demonstrating the way in which a student campaign could galvanize public attention and support. Three years on from the founding of Scholarism in 2011, key members of this group, notably its leader Joshua Wong, were now young university students having cut their teeth on the MNE campaign.

In understanding the background to Occupy Central, another significant incident took place at the University of Hong Kong (HKU), the oldest of the territory’s eight public universities, on 18 August 2011. On this day the Chinese vice premier visited HKU as part of events to mark its centenary. The vice premier was accompanied by a large number of PRC security staff in addition to around one-third of the Hong Kong police force. The high level of security on the HKU campus that day, together with the physical suppression and illegal detention of three student protestors, were widely criticized as representing an abandonment of HKU’s founding values and allowing principles of academic freedom to be violated. Press criticism was also directed at allegations that there had been ‘flattering’ treatment of the vice premier and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) at an institutional ceremony held on the day of the visit. HKU was criticized as ingratiating itself with the rich and powerful (HKU, 2012). An internal university report into events on 18 August 2011 asserted that HKU’s core values – the

pursuit of truth through its teaching and research; academic freedom and institutional autonomy; upholding freedom, liberty and diversity; and guaranteeing freedom of expression – had not been compromised. However, it did concede that ‘there was a strong impression in the community that core values were forsaken’ as a result of a series of organizational blunders (HKU, 2012: 24). In the wake of the fall-out from the 18 August incident the University’s Vice-Chancellor, Lap-Chee Tsui, announced that he would not be seeking another term of office.

Increasing disaffection with the political establishment in Hong Kong and the office of Chief Executive of the territory is also a key factor which contributed to popular support for Occupy Central. The office of Chief Executive is widely regarded in Hong Kong as politically loyal to Beijing (Lo, 2008) rather than the local population. This is why the control of the shortlist for Chief Executive by Beijing was such an incendiary issue. The current incumbent, C.Y. Leung, had become a particularly unpopular figure and courted controversy as a result of some of the remarks attributed to him during his term of office.

In 2010, when Liu Xiaobo, a human rights activist held as a political prisoner in the PRC, was awarded the Nobel peace prize, Leung suggested that Deng Xiaoping, the former paramount leader of the PRC, would have been a more deserving recipient. This suggestion caused considerable anger as it was Deng who had given the order for soldiers to open fire at the Tiananmen Square democracy protests on 4 June 1989. The 4 June anniversary, marking the military crackdown on the Tiananmen Square protesters in Beijing in 1989, is one of the most significant annual events in Hong Kong. Thousands attend a candlelight vigil at Victoria Park each year. The Tiananmen Square incident is symbolic of the distrust of the PRC felt by many Hong Kongers and led directly to considerable numbers emigrating to ‘safe’ countries such as Canada and Australia in the 1990s in the run-up to the hand-over. To this day Hong Kong residents who can afford it tend to favour sending their children to Western universities in the Anglosphere such as Australia, Canada, the US and the UK, increasing their opportunities to gain citizenship elsewhere.

Even though several local universities, such as HKU, Chinese University of Hong Kong, and Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, are regularly ranked among the world’s top 100, they are seen very much as a second best choice to studying at an elite overseas institution. This is partly because being educated internationally opens up possibilities of obtaining a ‘safer’, alternative passport for Hong Kong citizens. By contrast to those sent to Western universities to study, most Hong Kong students who attend one of the territory’s local universities are from ordinary, working class backgrounds. Their parents are normally unable to afford to send them abroad to study and, instead, students must take part in a highly competitive system to gain entry to a local institution.

### **One country, two systems**

During the 1980s Deng Xiaoping, the so-called ‘paramount leader’ of the PRC between 1978 and 1992, suggested that regions of China such as Hong Kong,

Macau and Taiwan could continue to enjoy distinct political, social and economic systems whilst remaining part of a unified, greater China. The policy is commonly referred to as ‘one country, two systems’ and sought to pave the way for the reunification of China as one country. In Hong Kong, for example, there is a separate higher education system largely founded on the English model, and there is also formal legal protection for academic freedom under the Basic Law of the SAR. Academic life in Hong Kong, in contrast to some other contexts in East Asia such as Singapore, is associated with an open tradition of debate with relatively high levels of academic freedom (Walker and Bodycott, 1997). However, there have been increasing indications that this environment is under threat as young academics, in particular, come under pressure to be ‘politically correct’ (Denyer, 2015; Macfarlane, 2014).

Hong Kong (SAR) was a British colony until being returned to the PRC in 1997 whilst Macau was similarly in Portuguese hands until 1999. The case of Taiwan (Republic of China) is distinctive, it having originally been populated by Taiwanese aborigines before the settlement of Han Chinese in the 17th century. The island was later controlled by the Dutch and then the Qing Dynasty before being handed to the Japanese during the late 19th century as part of the price of defeat in the First Sino–Japanese war. It remained a colony of the Japanese until their defeat in 1945. Tensions though quickly arose between occupying Chinese mainland troops and local Taiwanese following the end of the War, symbolized by the 228 incident when hundreds of Taiwanese were shot in anti-government protests. In 1949, the Chinese Nationalist army evacuated to Taiwan and ruled the colony using martial law until democratic reforms in the late 1980s. While Taiwan has, in effect, operated as an independent state since the Kuomintang (KMT) took control of the island in 1949, its position is militarily precarious and heavily reliant on American support. Taiwan has also become diplomatically isolated following the economic rise of the PRC and the corresponding increase in its political influence internationally. To this day the PRC does not officially recognize the existence of Taiwan which it regards as a ‘renegade Chinese province’ (Kaeding, 2014: 121).

Hence, while the ‘one country, two systems’ policy applies in theory to Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan, the latter remains an independent state albeit with limited international recognition since its displacement as the representative of China at the UN in 1971 by the PRC. In Hong Kong there is a history of tension, post-1997, in respect to the ‘one country, two systems’ concept. The first half of this equation, ‘one country’, is about pursuing policies that bring about closer social and political alignment between Hong Kong and the PRC whilst the second part, ‘two systems’, offers the hope of maintaining a distinctive and more socially and politically autonomous Hong Kong. This is underscored by the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration which contained the promise that Hong Kong would enjoy self-governing status for 50 years after being returned to the PRC in 1997. Hence, so-called ‘mainlandization’ of Hong Kong pushes in one direction (‘one country’) whilst popular local support for maintaining a separate identity represents the opposite impulse (‘two systems’).

### **'Mainlandization' and social unrest**

The protests of 2014 need to be understood against the backdrop of social and economic tensions within Hong Kong society. Although it is often popularly portrayed as an international city, Hong Kong is a largely mono-cultural Chinese society. Around 95 per cent of the population is ethnic Han Chinese. The next biggest ethnic group, Filipinos, working mainly as domestic helpers, comprise just over 2 per cent. 'Western' settlers make up less than 1 per cent of the population and other significant ethnic groups include Indians, brought to Hong Kong by the British. Hence, in terms of racial composition Hong Kong is very much a Chinese society with limited diversity.

However, underlying these statistics is a more complex reality. Since 1997 Hong Kong has been subject to considerable change sometimes referred to under the pejorative label of 'mainlandization'. This refers to 'political and legal processes in which the HKSAR has demonstrated the practices of mainland China' (Lo, 2008: 42). It includes claims that the civil service is increasingly politicized, that civil liberties are being eroded, that the media is becoming self-censoring and that 'soft authoritarianism' (So, 2002) has taken hold in reaction to increasing social protest.

Mainlandization has brought about rapid demographic change in Hong Kong. The proportion of births to migrant mothers from mainland China rose to almost 50 per cent in 2010, the children of whom automatically have a right to Hong Kong citizenship. Rising numbers of students in Hong Kong universities are from mainland China and constitute two-thirds of all 'international' students at HKU (HKU, 2014), for example. These demographic changes are gradually reshaping the composition of the academic and professional elite. Less visibly the values and assumptions of mainland settlers, shaped by living for generations in a society largely without democratic freedoms, may also be beginning to permeate local society.

Another subtle but nonetheless highly significant aspect of mainlandization is the way in which Hong Kong's Cantonese language and culture are being challenged and, to some extent, displaced as a result of increasing numbers of settlers from mainland China who speak Mandarin, the common language of the PRC rather than Cantonese which is the local language of Hong Kong. The written form of Chinese also differs between Hong Kong and mainland Chinese. In Hong Kong (and Taiwan) traditional Chinese characters are used. By contrast simplified Chinese is used in the PRC and this form is starting to spread in Hong Kong as retailers respond to the needs of large numbers of mainland tourists and settlers. The growing use of Mandarin is causing resentment among Hong Kong Cantonese speakers. Despite their racial identity many local Cantonese insist on referring to themselves as 'Hong Kongers' rather than 'Chinese'. This sense of dual identity found in Hong Kong (Brewer, 1999) may also be observed in Taiwan.

Mainland tourists and settlers are often portrayed in the Hong Kong media as uncouth and ill-mannered compared with local standards whilst wealthier visitors from the PRC are stereotyped as tasteless *nouveau riche*. There have been a number of incidents, often captured or reported via social media, purportedly

showing mainland Chinese acting in an anti-social manner. These tensions led, in 2012, to a professor from Peking University referring to Hong Kongers as ‘British running dogs’, a reference to Hong Kong’s former colonial status. In reprisal, supporters of a Hong Kong-based website paid for an advertisement in the best-selling Chinese-language newspaper, *Apple Daily*, which used the metaphor ‘locusts’ to describe mainland Chinese. The advertisement also accused mainland mothers of being social parasites or ‘birth tourists’, an allegation that has been the source of street protests in Hong Kong. The use of the term ‘locusts’ has gained currency as a common insult for mainland Chinese in Hong Kong (Editorial, 2012).

The post-1997 era has witnessed a ramping up of tensions connected with mainlandization, mixed in with social and economic grievances targeted at a government seen as having limited local legitimacy. There are declining opportunities for social and occupational mobility in Hong Kong and rising inequality (LegCo, 2015) in an economy dominated by property developers and the financial sector at one end of the spectrum with tourism and retail offering largely low-paying jobs with limited prospects at the other end. This is draining away belief in the ‘Lion Rock spirit’ representing the idea that hard work will bring success (Hui, 2015). Around 20 per cent of the population of Hong Kong are estimated to be living in poverty (Cheng, 2014b), something which has been attributed to a laissez-faire approach to the economy (Cheng, 2014a). The eight publicly funded universities in Hong Kong take just 18 per cent of the 17–20-year-old age cohort (University Grants Committee, 2010), one of the lowest rates of participation in higher education in the developed world. The expansion of opportunities for participation in post-secondary education is taking place almost entirely at sub-degree level within the self-financed post-secondary sector (LegCo, 2015).

Since the early 2000s Hong Kong has witnessed a series of street protests. These have become practically an annual tradition on 1 July each year, acting as a pro-democracy counterpoint to the anniversary of the founding of the CCP. On 1 July 2003 up to half a million are estimated to have taken part in demonstrations with a range of grievances including housing policy, cut-backs in social welfare and opposition to Article 23 of the Basic Law (Lo, 2008). Article 23 gives the Hong Kong government anti-subversion powers which are seen by pro-democracy advocates as a threat to freedom of speech and assembly (So, 2002). Significantly, around one-fifth of demonstrators at the 2003 protests were secondary school students, members of a group calling themselves ‘Secondary School Students Against Article 23’, formed shortly before the 1 July protests (Cheng, 2014a).

The high-speed rail link between Shenzhen in the PRC and Hong Kong became a focus of protests and civil disobedience in 2009 and 2010. The dispute came to symbolize the insensitivity of government towards the poor and socially disadvantaged and its favouring of business interests. The anti-high speed rail link movement, though ultimately unsuccessful, has been cited by some observers as significant in the politicization of social movements in Hong Kong and influential on student groups (Cheng, 2014a). Non-violent civil disobedience tactics used

during this protest were subsequently adopted by students involved in Scholarism and Occupy Central.

### **Taiwan and the sunflower movement**

The student protest movement in Hong Kong further needs to be understood in the context of events which took place in Taiwan in March 2014. Three hundred students occupied the legislature in Taipei for 24 days in protest at moves to force a new trade agreement with the PRC through parliament without the usual clause-by-clause period for discussion and review. Outside the Legislative Yuan, the law-making body based in the Taiwanese capital, Taipei, around 10,000 protesters gathered in support of the student occupation. The trade agreement which was at the centre of the storm was simply the latest in a series of initiatives to strengthen economic and trading ties between Taiwan and the PRC which had been forged under Taiwan's President Ma Ying-jeou (Kaeding, 2014). Partly as a result of the unpopularity of Ma's policies in strengthening trading ties with the PRC, the KMT was heavily defeated by the opposition Democratic Progressive Party in local elections held in late 2014.

The protest, which became known as the sunflower movement, represented widespread popular concern in Taiwan about 'mainlandization'. This is, in close parallel with the situation in Hong Kong, focused on growing distrust about the role and influence of PRC politicians and businesses in the Taiwanese economy, media and wider society. The umbrella and sunflower movements shared much in common as student-initiated non-violent actions aimed at curbing mainlandization and asserting democratic principles. Both movements deployed similar tactics, ideals and organizational skills. The actions of the Taiwanese students were a source of inspiration to their counterparts in Hong Kong and, in the wake of the occupation of the Legislative Yuan, Chen Wei-ting, one of the leaders of the sunflower movement, sought (unsuccessfully) to enter Hong Kong to support the 1 July protest in 2014.

### **Student voices on campus**

During the umbrella movement protests university campuses were awash with the visible symbols of protest: mainly banners and placards in support of Occupy Central. There were a large number of open meetings convened, sometimes in collaboration with more politically active members of the professoriate. Here it is important to note that most of the protesters and sympathizers were drawn from the ranks of the undergraduate student population, the vast majority of whom are local Cantonese. In marked contrast, the majority of postgraduate students hail from the Chinese mainland and, therefore, were far less likely to participate, or even necessarily to sympathize with the aims of the protest movement. Over this period universities sought to walk a tightrope between open support for the actions of students and appearing to side with the authorities. The length of the protests,



stretching over months rather than a few short days, made this task more difficult. While expressing an initial desire to remain neutral, all the university vice-chancellors made calls by early October for students to return to campus. In doing so they tended to stress ‘safety concerns’.

On 5 October 2014, for example, the recently installed vice-chancellor of HKU, Peter Mathieson, issued the following statement to students and staff by email:

I appeal to all HKU students and staff to leave all protest areas immediately. Please stay calm and leave in an orderly manner without delay. I am making this appeal from my heart because I genuinely believe that if you stay, there is a risk to your safety. Please leave now: you owe it to your loved ones to put your safety above all other considerations.

(Email from Peter Mathieson to academic staff and students,  
5 October 2014)

In calling for an end to student participation in street protests the universities arguably did the government’s bidding although they played on mounting fears about the possibility of a Tiananmen Square-style crackdown. While such a dramatic scenario did not materialize, the collective memory concerning this incident was in the forefront of the minds of many, especially those old enough to remember. There were also variations in the extent to which universities were permitted to become sites of protest. At Baptist University, for example, the vice-chancellor refused to present degrees to graduates holding yellow umbrellas and, in reprisal, some students declined to shake his hand (Deva, 2014).

During the period of the protests I was working as a professor of education at HKU. Attendance at my undergraduate class from the beginning of the class boycott on 22 September dropped dramatically with only around one-third of students attending teaching sessions. By contrast, my postgraduate class, the majority of whom were from mainland China, was more or less unaffected by the boycott. This serves as an illustration of the way in which the student protesters were drawn from local Hong Kongers, who make up the vast majority of the undergraduate population. Many Hong Kong university departments, including my own at the time, use attendance registers as part of a more paternalistic approach to student learning than might be found in many Western higher education contexts. Along with a number of other teachers I took the decision to ‘lose’ my class register during the course of the protests. I also lobbied the vice-chancellor and the dean of my faculty, in my capacity as associate dean for learning and teaching, to encourage others to do likewise in order to protect students from any adverse future consequences of attendance information coming to light.

My undergraduate class at this time consisted of a group of third-year students studying for a BEd in Liberal Studies, a subject introduced as a compulsory subject in the reform of the senior secondary school curriculum in Hong Kong in 2009. Liberal Studies has become a battleground of interpretation and debate in the

education system connected to the raising of student social and political consciousness on one hand pitted against the forging of ‘Hong Kong Chinese’ citizenship on the other (Fung and Yip, 2010).

I was teaching the students a course ambitiously entitled ‘Ethics and social responsibilities of the state, the corporation and the individual’. A reflective log was used as part of the learning and assessment on the module and called on students to consider the connections between ethical theories, such as utilitarianism, and their own life experiences. Although there was no intention in setting this assessment to capture their reflections on the Occupy Central movement, the log also proved to be a vehicle by which many students did just this as part of the process of recording their thoughts. A number of students gave their consent for these specific elements of their reflections to be reported as part of this book chapter. In doing so I have changed their real names in order to protect their identity.

Students often faced criticism and objections from other family members, especially parents and other ‘seniors’ for taking part in the protests. The role of filial piety in Chinese culture is strong and so defying such advice was something not undertaken lightly:

I was sharing my experiences, decisions and struggles that I had encountered around midnight on 27 September with my cousins. Everything was fine until my uncle heard about our conversation. He immediately responded to me and publicly criticized students’ actions. He stated that he supported the government and it was unwise for students to fight for democracy in such a way. He respected the right of speech and assembly of all citizens, but it was not an excuse for students to do so. Their actions could only lead to a decline of Hong Kong’s economy, especially small local businesses, like restaurants and taxi drivers. He condemned students and said their actions seemed to be ‘great’ on the surface. In reality, it was a series of self-centered actions, realizing their own dreams but causing others suffering.

(Mike)

Students sought to counter responses that the protests would damage the economy and reputation of Hong Kong as a business hub by making arguments based on longer-term societal benefits and concern for democracy. These, they argued, trumped such shorter-term economic worries:

We should not put a mere focus on the short-term economic impacts from the occupation; instead, we should foresee a long-term positive impact from the act of occupying main streets. Here, the ‘long-term positive impact’ would definitely be a constructive political dialogue between Hong Kong government and the People (and, hopefully, a chance for practicing real democracy by universal suffrage) derived from the means of occupation.

(Benny)

The varied motivations of many thousands of ordinary Hong Kong residents to join in the protests, underpinned by economic and social deprivation, were also the subject of comment:

In recent years, many government decisions have affected the livelihood of the lower class as well as the rural residents, especially under the issue of the Link, the development of North-East New Territories Regions, etc. Many of them have been forced to move away from their hometown and end their traditional businesses due to the redemption of the land by the private enterprises and government for economic development. When citizens voiced out their opinion, government mostly just ignored them. I think attempting to occupy some major roads and region is the only means to urge government to face the citizens.

(Lai Fong)

On a personal level, other students sought to emphasize their peaceful intent or felt a sense of guilt about not doing more to support the protests themselves:

I chose to take part in the recent civil disobedient movement by occupying the main street of Admiralty. I want to fight for universal suffrage in Hong Kong and I also understand my action would cause inconvenience to the public and store owners in the area. I did not threaten anyone. I would also wish people to join the protests to fight for the betterment of Hong Kong.

(Tan)

I would like to explain my struggle in the Occupy Central Movement. I tell myself and others that I support democracy, universal suffrage and Occupy Central but I have never gone to Admiralty or done anything to support it except donating a bottle of water and carrying boxes of water into the SU office because I want to help my friends.

(Monica)

The vast majority of students in this class were local Cantonese. However, the protests posed a particular dilemma of identity for mainland students, as illustrated by the following reflection:

As a mainland student, never before have I experienced such a dilemma of identity, entangled between Hong Kong and the Mainland. In my eyes it is praiseworthy of the youth to throw themselves into the breach for democracy and liberty. The courage to voice dissent from the mainstream or authority is constructive for the development of a society, which should be regarded as a lofty virtue, for which I admire the students amid the movement. However, supportive as I was to the courageous act, I hesitated when invited to join the gathering on the street. My family reiterated that I had to be more than

scrupulous on these politically sensitive issues, and never should I mingle with the 'ignorant youth' who were vulnerable to manipulation.

(Suyan)

The reflective logs also led students to contemplate their future role as Liberal Studies teachers. Following current affairs is a common methodology among Liberal Studies teachers but this raised a particular dilemma in the context of the Occupy Central protests as to whether it was appropriate – or even possible – for a teacher to remain 'neutral':

With the current Occupy Central incident, I have a question in mind: Should teachers remain politically 'neutral' in classroom? Or should they reveal their political stance to their students? ... In the future, when I am asked by students on my standpoint on religion, politics or other sensitive issues, I will be telling the truth.

(Man Tak)

Earlier in this year when I was on my teaching practicum with another student, there was a conflict between us and the supervisor on our teaching about the Occupy Movement. It was at the time of developmental stage of the Occupy Movement when different voices from the public were arguing about whether we should support the movement. As event was timely and important we adopted it as our issue in teaching students media literacy by showing multiple sources about Occupy Movement with reporting strategies. After the lesson, our supervisor claimed our selections were only opinions representing a small population and that the majority was supporting stability. She was implicitly asking us to spread the anti-occupy movement message.

(Kitty)

Those students who did actively participate in Occupy Central often expressed an earnest, though perhaps, some might argue, naïve hope that their actions would bring about change for the better in Hong Kong society:

I participated in Occupy Central. I stayed at Central for days, sitting down peacefully without any violence.... in my role as both a citizen and student, I sincerely hope the government will listen to our voices and construct a harmonious society through establishing a just and real democratic political system.

(Raymond)

These brief extracts from my students' reflective logs provide an insight into the dilemmas and commitments they faced in determining their own attitude and engagement with the umbrella movement. They illustrate the often difficult and complex nature of student engagement with the Occupy Central movement. Few

found active participation an easy decision despite commonplace accusations in the popular press that students were ‘naïve’ and ‘selfish’ (Wong, 2014).

## Conclusion

While the ‘Occupy Central’ movement may be understood in the context of the wider, global ‘occupy’ movement and connected to the growing wealth gap in Hong Kong, it was principally sparked by local and regional political and cultural conditions. There are close parallels that can be drawn between the student protests in Hong Kong and Taiwan in terms of underlying concerns about the growing power and influence of the PRC in the mainlandization of these distinctive and historically separate cultural contexts.

While not quite representing an ‘Asian spring’ in the manner of the 2011 ‘Arab spring’, the student-led protests in both Hong Kong and Taiwan represent popular resistance to patterns of social and economic convergence with the PRC. The umbrella and sunflower protests have attracted popular support because of widespread distrust and dissatisfaction with parts of the local political establishment and strengthening business links with the PRC. Deteriorating opportunities for upward social and occupational mobility in Hong Kong add fuel to this disenchantment. A 2015 research report from the Legislative Council of Hong Kong notes, without irony, that ‘social mobility is essential to the creation of social harmony’ (LegCo, 2015: 9). Recent events have proven that the reverse is also true.

Shaped by technology, better educated than their predecessors, and with a commitment to liberal social values, the so-called ‘strawberry generation’ has been characterized as ‘soft, faint-hearted and easily bruised; stereotyped as quitters, poor communicators and self-centred’ (Hui, 2015: 16). Yet, far from being a ‘me’ generation (Wong, 2014), the Hong Kong ‘millennials’ are proving that they have a strong political conscience informed by a sense of responsibility for the future. Fears of mainlandization have brought a sense of urgency and a ‘now or never’ attitude to their movement. As a banner on the campus of HKU implored back in late 2014, ‘If not now, then when? If not us, who?’ It remains to be seen if this sentiment will prove any more than a forlorn hope.

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