

The Tragedy of Hong Kong

Sunny Liang (2021-03-15)

The summer of 2019 saw Hong Kong consumed by protests of extraordinary scale. For several months following its commencement in June, the constantly escalating situation maintained international media fixation in an age of world-news amnesia. To say that the case of Hong Kong's 2019-2020 protests evaded this amnesia, though, is to ignore the real tragedy of almost every large-scale, long-term sociopolitical movement in modern history.

The popular and exhausted narrative is that the protests started in response to the infamous extradition bill, then, especially after the bill was formally withdrawn four months in, the protest shifted to broader opposition to Hong Kong's erosion of democracy. This narrative, though, fails to consider that the protests were about this broader and more complicated issue all along. Notice that the extradition bill was actually an entirely reasonable proposition with sound justification, only that few people in Hong Kong trusted the Chinese nor their own local government not to take advantage of the bill for malicious purposes. The problem from the start was that [Hong Kong's democracy was never really there to begin with](#). In fact, it was never there even under British occupation. Hong Kong's turmoil is not caused by the loss of democracy that once was, it is due to nostalgia and desire for a democracy that never was, democratic ideals that managed to seep into Hong Kong culture from British influence despite never actually obtaining them.

Opposition effectively suppressed the protests by eliminating all this context and distracting from the underlying issues. Supporters and protestors, for the most part, failed to recognize and counter this. They neglected the media front, the most important battlefield in modern warfare. Many in favour of the protests also seemed to forget the original enemy, that is, their own puppet-government and the authoritarians controlling it. Instead, as the protests increased in severity, frequency, and violence, the object of antagonization shifted to the faceless men whose uniform ranks concealed the sources of tear gas and [dyed-water](#). The riot police were, for the most part, also Hong Kongers. Thus, the CCP managed to pit masked mob of Hong Kong citizens armed with traffic cones and umbrellas against masked mob of fellow Hong Kong citizens armed with riot shields and bean bag rounds (and, in a few cases, live ammunition).

At some point, controversy devolved from sociopolitical to bloodsport. Invisible forces had first turned peaceful protest into gladiatorial (mis)matches, then turned meaningful discussion into cyclical argument over whether this or that policeman was justified in [shooting this or that protestor](#). People debated every little gesture and movement in these cell phone videos like spectators of sports argue over the righteousness of a foul.

This is the real tragedy of Hong Kong. That the immense sacrifices of a city's population will be in vain because we were too busy debating the merits and ethics of individual participants as if we're all just jeering spectators of some tear-gas-Superbowl.

The democratic movement's failure is nearly inevitable due to the legal circumstances surrounding Hong Kong's present autonomy. Many supporters of the movement cite China's infringement of the terms of agreement between them and the United Kingdom negotiated for the handover of 1997. So, let's be

optimistic for one moment. Perhaps [China could be incentivized to compromise](#) and Hong Kong can reform under its once-promised democratic government? The problem is that China doesn't care. And, no Western nation cares enough to take China up on it (viz. care about it more than their own trade relations with China). That's the trouble with international agreements is that there's no higher authority to enforce anything except for "diplomacy" and "sanctions" which have little meaning to the world's largest economy with a long history of self-sufficiency. Regardless, China's legal obligations are applicable only until 2047. Hong Kong protestors themselves tend to be consciously averse to discussing the possibilities past this date and most of them are even more averse to bringing up secession as a possibility (partly because it's not, partly because they believe it would hurt their own movement).

For better or worse, Hong Kong's story is yet unfinished. The protests of 2019 were not the first, nor will they be the last in the city. As the CCP will have it, Hong Kong's economic importance will continually decrease alongside a steady and gradual death of its democratic spirit. Chinese authoritarian homogeneity will entropically diffuse into Hong Kong in the following decades as the will of its people diminishes with each fizzled protest whose pyrotechnics will be remembered in history only by a scattered diaspora and their progeny who will gradually forget too their grandparents' vaguely recollected stories of the Hong Kong that once or, perhaps, never was.