

Two Occupys

The New Global Language of Protest

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In the fall of 2011, after two years in China, I came home to New York. Occupy Wall Street was at its height. Zuccotti Park, less than an acre of concrete in the city's Financial District, was a teeming little universe of dissent and potential, more radically open and charged with life than any public space I'd ever seen. It changed you, just milling around and deliberating with people who, by and large, were straining toward the better angels of their nature. A thousand flowers, a hundred schools of thought: this was actually it. After the People's Republic of China—which is neither the people's nor a republic—I was suddenly mainlining freedom, democracy, and diversity in what felt like an actual people's republic, however short-lived and anarchic.

Tiny Zuccotti inspired a global archipelago of Occupy offshoots (including a small but long-lived encampment in Hong Kong), but Turkey's Occupy Gezi and Hong Kong's more recent Occupy movement mark an inflection point. Sustained, fiercely local mass movements are tapping into and extending a new global language of protest. Both in Turkey and in China, fearmongers and propagandists blamed malicious foreign influences for the protests, but the reality is less sinister and more significant. Occupy is serving as an open-source template for dissent, a transparent and adaptable playbook for organizing global movements with diverse aims and values. By turns autonomous and hyperconnected, the template is an uncanny fit for our precarious, plugged-in life.

In Hong Kong, the Occupy template provided a name and an initial strategy. Disrupt and take over a major financial district. Build a mass movement through nonviolence, savvy self-organizing, and radical chutzpah. The parallels multiplied in practice. Both youth-driven movements centered themselves on liberated urban space and drew strength from the authorities' mistakes, winning mainstream sympathy. In both Hong Kong and New York, mainstream *support* was just becoming a possibility when the occupations came to an end. The occupiers mastered forceful, inclusive messaging on the biggest issue of the day: the tyranny of the elites—what Eli Friedman

described in the *Nation* (comparing the two Occupys) as “the inability of anyone except the super-wealthy to have a voice in politics.” Each movement charted a viral trajectory, lasting in its most potent, concentrated form for just under an autumn. Neither “won,” but both reimagined activism in the heartlands of global capital. Both movements now struggle with disarray and disillusionment.

The differences were just as significant. Instead of an explicit struggle against inequality in the name of the 99 percent, Hong Kong’s Occupy was a classic democracy movement, bourgeois-friendly, with calls for local autonomy and economic justice kept on the sidelines. By embodying horizontalist ideals and going for the economic jugular of global capitalism, Zuccotti became a symbol and a platform, as much a meme as a movement. On the other hand, occupiers everywhere can learn from the scale and sophistication of Hong Kong’s movement: its mass participation (which dwarfed New York’s), its clear and trenchant demands, its willingness to allow accountable coalition-style leadership, and its peaceful deployment of cultural and linguistic difference (as well as shared global signifiers) to articulate and carry on the struggle for democracy.

Two academics (legal scholar Benny Tai and sociologist Chan Kin-man) and a Baptist minister (Rev. Chu Yiu-ming)—all respected figures in the city’s pro-democracy movement—first laid the groundwork for Occupy Central With Peace and Love in early 2013. They have been careful to emphasize that the movement is completely homegrown and locally focused. The universal suffrage promised in Hong Kong’s Basic Law—agreed to by the PRC in preparation for the city’s handover (“return” is the term used in mainland China)—had been long in coming. The year 2017 had emerged as yet another hopeful deadline for implementing genuine popular elections for the office of the Chief Executive, ostensibly equivalent to a president or prime minister elsewhere. The city-state has never been a true democracy, but in the later years of British rule, it began a slow progression in that direction. That progression has now slowed almost to a standstill.

Occupy Central, spearhead and rallying cry for a broader “pan-democratic” movement, was designed to keep up the pressure: one more battle in an escalating war. Compared to Occupy Wall Street, the movement operated with a high degree of preparation and coordination, pursuing a closely calibrated timeline of popular consultations, votes, and contingencies, starting over a year before the protests themselves. Two years earlier, the city’s independent-minded student movement had shown its own organizing mettle with an intense campaign against a pro-Beijing “patriotic education” curriculum. In June 2014, an informal, wildly popular referendum gave Occupy advance legitimacy, with nearly 800,000 Hong Kongers effectively expressing their support.

On August 31, China’s legislature, the National People’s Congress, announced that there might be universal suffrage in 2017, but that



Protesters flee tear gas, October 7, 2014. Photo by Pasu Au Yeung via Flickr.

effectively only pro-Beijing candidates could run. Outrage reached a fever pitch. Staying narrowly within the letter of the Basic Law, Beijing was sending an unmistakable signal that full democracy was not on the table. On September 28, ignoring the dithering of the Occupy Central leadership, the Hong Kong Federation of Students and the student group Scholarism launched the occupation with support from an estimated 50,000 protesters.

Assaulted with eighty-seven rounds of tear gas and rubber bullets, students and protesters dug in and were joined by an additional 30,000 Hong Kongers, enraged by the violence of the police. Two days later, now attracting widespread local and international solidarity, a reportedly even larger crowd was defiantly blocking major roads, and protesters had erected tents and established occupations in the heart of the city. Direct attacks followed, allegedly by hired goons with ties to the city's gangs and ultimately to Beijing. A broad base of support, including local political parties, labor unions, religious leaders, and other institutions, began to coalesce, though not without opposition. Umbrellas carried against the monsoon rains were soon protecting faces from police tear gas. The Umbrella Movement was born.

Though badly outmatched, the protesters showed “more staying power than anyone, including themselves, imagined,” wrote Nick Frisch in *Dissent* four weeks later. On the mainland, noted Frisch, “protests are usually divided, conquered, and smothered with well-rehearsed authoritarian finesse.” But Hong Kong’s civil liberties under the Basic Law—plus media flashbulbs, ham-handed policing, and local support—gave the dedicated, overwhelmingly young occupiers a chance to get the movement firmly established. Occupy with Hong Kong Characteristics turned out to be

orderly, structured, and resilient, doing its homework and cleaning up after itself. The movement made specific, popular demands geared towards genuine universal suffrage, direct negotiations with the government and the ouster of pro-Beijing Chief Executive C. Y. Leung.

For all its focus and organization, the movement was always multiple, with three largely autonomous protest camps around the city. The occupation at Causeway Bay was the smallest and least defined of the three, but those at Admiralty and Mong Kok were widely acknowledged as representing different protest themes and social formations, however stereotyped. Near the city's political center, the Admiralty camp stood for the high-minded suffrage struggle, globally oriented and bourgeois-supported; meanwhile, Mong Kok across the harbor was a working-class occupation with a strong local spirit (shading into Hong Kong separatism), intimidating barricades, and undercurrents of class tension.

At times, political grievances seemed all but indistinguishable from economic ones, given that Hong Kong's economic 1 percent and political 1 percent are largely one and the same; Beijing's preferred method of controlling the city is through local business tycoons. Economic colonization may not be too strong a phrase to describe the current influx of mainland money. Calls to abolish "functional constituencies" (special interest groups that control close to half of the legislature, by design) can be seen as analogous to American despair over *Citizens United*. Vast inequality and stratospheric housing prices characterize the city, while its ruling crony capitalists are busy courting the mainland's newly minted millionaires—who in turn are seen as buying up the city's (untainted) milk powder, filling up hospital birthing wards, and cornering the housing market.

Hong Kong, like New York, is a hall of mirrors, a stage that all the world can see, where both media and capital magnify. Both China and not-China, it is the most effective place in the world to protest, in relative safety, against the Chinese Communist Party. This is a right that the Umbrella Movement has been keenly aware of and determined to exercise before it is too late. Local puppets—the business oligarchs and the "pro-Beijing camp" of politicians who rule the city—were the protests' immediate target, their PRC puppetmasters the ultimate one.

Hong Kong stands in a potent relation to the PRC: a living, breathing, but threatened alternative to one-party authoritarianism just across the border. As a "Special Administrative Region," the city is a unique point of leverage in the Chinese system, a fulcrum on which democratization and liberalization may or may not turn. The three protest camps established around the city not only gave the Umbrella Movement a base of operations, they enacted the autonomy that the city has been losing under Beijing's control, from shrinking press freedom to the presence of the People's Liberation

Army and Beijing's "Liaison Office."

The Umbrella Movement represented the largest series of protests on Chinese soil since Tiananmen Square twenty-five years earlier—itsself a movement inspired by and linked to the rise of Solidarity and unfolding events in the USSR and Eastern Europe. The May Fourth Movement of 1919, a founding moment of modern Chinese political activism, had likewise reflected a post-Versailles, anti-imperialist ferment then kicking off all over the world. Westerners who care about democracy and human rights in China should take note: movement-building at home may be the surest way to help your Chinese comrades, inspiring them with a framework and a sense of momentum that crosses borders more rapidly than ever.

If Occupy Wall Street carried on and extended some of the best traditions of American dissent, Hong Kong's Occupy Central did the same for the Chinese activist tradition. "Democracy Walls" were covered in colorful sticky notes with political messages, echoing Beijing in 1978, while the twelve-foot, wooden Umbrella Man statue by the artist Milk echoed Tiananmen's Goddess of Democracy, only now with an upraised umbrella. Today, with the mainland under tight control, nowhere is China's activist legacy more alive than in Hong Kong. The city's support was vital in sustaining the Tiananmen protests; in the bloody aftermath it was the Hong Kong-run Operation Yellowbird that helped dozens of leaders escape to or via the city. In Hong Kong at least, 1989 was a formative year: prompting a diaspora in the years before the 1997 handover, casting a pall over the handover itself, and setting the pro-democracy movement on the course that led to the Umbrella Movement.

The increasingly authoritarian style of Xi Jinping, with his half-nationalist, half-Maoist "turn," has set the stakes even higher. There is a feeling in the city that the clock is ticking, that autonomy and freedom are slipping away. The traditional view—that the best assurance of a democratic Hong Kong was a democratic China—now seems premised on an impossible hope. As a result, some younger activists overtly espouse decoupling the city's democracy movement from broader efforts to democratize China, an understandable but divisive stance.

Unlike in New York, where secessionist impulses have always been marginal, Hong Kong has a history of separateness to draw on, however colonially inflected. The territory has evolved through a unique triangulation between the West with its relentless cultural and commercial influence, the global Cantonese diaspora (of which Hong Kong is the capital), and mainland China (which calls the shots politically). Besides the echoes of mainland movements, traces of global movements manifested the city's cosmopolitan spirit—from chants of "Hands up, don't shoot," borrowed from Ferguson, to a post-it note "Lennon Wall," invoking Prague in '89. But other messages and moments made clear that a very specific kind of national awakening was also in the air. Without necessarily ceasing to be "ethnically



Umbrella Man, October 11, 2014. Photo by Pasu Au Yeung via Flickr.

Chinese,” younger protesters in particular were busily crystallizing a distinctive Hong Kong identity—grounded in Cantonese but hybrid in its history and culture, developing now from deeply felt differences with the mainland.

In contrast to Occupy Wall Street, the Hong Kong protests have had a vital cultural and linguistic dimension, which may anchor and even deepen the movement—or end up dividing it. Sixty-seven percent of people in the city identify broadly as “Hongkongers,” while only 31 percent identify broadly as “Chinese,” according to a December survey that asked about the overlapping categories “Hongkongers,” “Hongkongers in China,” “Chinese,” and “Chinese in Hong Kong.” The number represented a record low for the “Chinese” category; the shift to a new identity is accelerating. Inspired by scholar Chin Wan’s “Hong Kong City-State Theory,” a small but recognizable movement is now going beyond the Basic Law to call for Hong Kong’s full autonomy as a quasi-independent city-state. Student leader Lester Shum, among others, began describing Beijing’s approach as a continuation of the very colonialism that was supposed to have ended with the 1997 “return.” These are radical words.

Neglected on the mainland as a “dialect” despite its distinctiveness and a global population of some 70 million speakers, Cantonese played a starring role in the protests. Though it remains the territory’s de facto

official language along with English, Cantonese faces a serious long-term threat from the Standard Mandarin that Beijing is throwing all its weight behind. Not just the mother tongue of almost all the protesters, Cantonese increasingly served as a self-conscious weapon of struggle and solidarity on T-shirts, signs, and websites. This larger shift is also evident in Taiwan, where a distinct group of pro-independence activists are now promoting Taiwanese (Hoklo) instead of Mandarin.

Though hardly reported on in the West, last summer's Sunflower Movement in Taiwan saw a sustained, successful occupation of the legislature after the hurried passage of a controversial trade agreement with the mainland. The result, participant-observer Ian Rowen writes in the *Journal of Asian Studies*, was "an inadvertent unification, however temporary, of the Taiwanese independence movements and the democratic left," as well as "the development of new sympathies and alliances with their counterparts in Hong Kong." The "One Country, Two Systems" approach aimed at Hong Kong, Macau, and eventually Taiwan is looking almost as empty as the "autonomous" regions the PRC has allotted to Tibetans, Uyghurs, and officially recognized ethnic groups. But Beijing ignores the political and cultural diversity of the broader "Sinosphere," effectively its near-abroad, at its own peril.

Back in Hong Kong, protesters circulated "Umbrella Terms," rich with intricate Cantonese wordplay, enhancing a sense of local solidarity and a politics of cultural distinctiveness. Take the word *gau1wu1*—"shopping" in the mouth of a mainlander, it can mean "yelling nonsense" in Hong Kong Cantonese. When Chief Executive Leung called for Hong Kongers (and mainlanders) to continue "shopping" in spite of the protests, he was mocked for "yelling nonsense." *Gau1wu1* then took on a third meaning, "to occupy"—"I'm shopping" now meaning "I'm occupying"—mocking Mandarin, mainland shoppers, and Leung in a single word. Then there was the use of traditional characters (still standard in HK, replaced by simplified variants on the mainland) and of special Cantonese-only characters and character combinations, including the crucial word for umbrella.

There is a legitimate question about xenophobia here—whether Hong Kong identity is now forming from an instinctive revulsion towards low-class mainlanders. On the other hand, political and economic differences are now both reflecting and reinforcing a very real cultural and linguistic divide. Seven million Hong Kongers have reason to be frightened of absorption into mainland China, with a population 200 times larger and a poor history of fostering pluralism. Self-determination, pursued in a cosmopolitan spirit, can be a vital ingredient for progressive politics, as many argued before last year's vote on Scottish independence. Felt difference gives Hong Kong's movement a staying power that was lacking in New York, where many protesters could claim to represent America more broadly, but, without an ongoing oppositional identity, melted back into the quiescent mainstream.

As in New York four years ago, Hong Kong's instant Occupy histories have not been long in coming. OWS had an Archives Working Group from early on. Archivists from the New York Historical Society, New York University, the Internet Archive, the Occupy Archive at George Mason University, and other institutions collected thousands of artifacts. Likewise, the Umbrella Movement Visual Archives & Research Collective has been active on the ground in Hong Kong—the Lennon Wall was reportedly taken down, post-it note by post-it note, for preservation. Both movements' sense of "making history," however powerful a force they represented, may have come too easily.

A co-production of Verso and *n+1*, *Occupy! Scenes from Occupied America* appeared as a wide-ranging collective diary of the movement, just a month after the final raid on Zuccotti. Described as "a prism to put to the lamp of the event," *Occupy!* drew on the style of the occupation itself—diffuse, eclectic, intimate, collaborative—to describe a halting but hopeful process of political awakening. In a comparable but more impersonal register, a participant-observer using the name Zhong Zhong published the Chinese-language *Behind the Scenes at "Occupy Central" and "Anti-Occupy Central"* last October, just weeks into the movement. This sympathetic instant history was recently countered by the pro-Beijing book *How Was Occupy Central Forged?* (answer: Anglo-American meddling, an insufficiently patriotic education system) and the government's own "Report on the Recent Community and Political Situation in Hong Kong," whose conclusion gamely pretends that nothing much really happened at all.

Rehearsing Hong Kong's ten-ish days that shook the world and launched the movement, *Behind the Scenes* makes it clear that Asia's financial capital underwent a much more profound disruption of "business as usual" than New York did in 2011. In one form or another, up to 1.2 million people, or 20 percent of the population, joined a popular mass movement. The movement's deep embeddedness in some of the city's major social formations (students, workers, pro-democracy liberals) give it a fighting chance. The city's elections, however flawed, continue to indicate strong support for genuine democracy. Pan-democrats control a majority of the forty directly elected seats in the Legislative Council, but the other thirty are elected by much smaller "functional constituencies" like "Tourism" and "Finance," reliably pro-Beijing. In a system rigged for oligarchy, the question of tactics is front and center.

Hong Kong's Occupy lost steam for many of the same reasons New York's did: policing and legal strategies designed to dismantle, popular weariness with constant disruption, a lack of galvanizing victories or tragedies. The original organizers Chan, Tai, and Rev. Chu turned themselves in to the police for a sense of symbolic closure; the streets and encampments were cleared. The Occupy template works up to a certain point, but lacks strategies for dealing with a dug-in opposition and with deeply embedded structures, whether in the two most powerful nations on earth or beyond.

“Carnivals come cheap. The true test of their worth is what remains the day after, how our normal daily life will be changed,” Slavoj Žižek told the occupiers in Zuccotti Park. “The hard and patient work” it would take to counter the power of Wall Street, or to bring about universal suffrage in Hong Kong, remains to be conceived, let alone accomplished.

With last fall’s push inconclusive, both sides in Hong Kong are now focused on winning over any remaining undecideds. Relative restraint (likely spiced with covert provocation) served Beijing well, but now the puppet-masters and their puppets may be pushing their advantage. Hong Kong needs to be “re-enlightened” about “One Country, Two Systems,” says a top official in Beijing. Several hundred protesters have been arrested for inciting, organizing, and participating in “unlawful assemblies,” not to mention the more dangerous and opaque arrests of many sympathizers on the mainland. The stage is set for fresh confrontations between a wily but intransigent authoritarian-tycoon alliance and a maturing democracy movement that is developing powerful autonomist and socioeconomic critiques. Talk of “Hong Kong Nationalism,” long beyond the pale, is beginning to spread. Opponents of this trend warn darkly that the slightest whiff of separatism will give Beijing the excuse it needs for an eventual crackdown. This was anything but inevitable—if Beijing had taken a different approach since 1997, Hong Kong might have served as a model, and a pivot, for political reform on the mainland.

The shift in Hong Kong identity is deeply demographic, driven by the young. And in the Chinese-speaking world, well-organized students are a recognized vanguard with a particularly important role to play. Elsewhere, young people are also on the front lines, propelled by their sense of an exhausting status quo: political regression, economic crisis, ecological catastrophe. They continue the “historic agency” described by C. Wright Mills in his “Letter to the New Left”—but then as now, students and workers need to align. The Umbrella Movement was a crash course in mass civil disobedience.

Compared with the “color revolutions” of the previous decade, Occupy and Occupy-style protests have been animated by a more radical energy, a greater willingness to confront both Capital and the State—as well as an insistence on establishing largely autonomous physical occupations, supported by online organizing. From Tahrir to Zuccotti to Gezi to Euromaidan to Central, Occupy names a certain energy, a set of practices and strategies now nearly five years young, diversely manifesting in a range of new social movements. In Hong Kong, close to a year after launching, it is living, growing, and adapting.

Ross Perlin writes on language, labor, and politics.

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