

**Oil on Water:
Some Personal Musings on Hong Kong's Summer of Protests**

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Oil on Water

“Be water” is the nature of Hong Kong’s protests in the summer of 2019. That is, they are like H₂O in all its forms: strong like ice, fluid like water, gathering like dew, and ethereal like mist. For as Bruce Lee, the martial arts icon, once said “be formless, shapeless. Now if you put water in a cup it becomes the cup, put it in a teapot, it becomes the teapot.” In practice, this philosophy means you are adaptable in any circumstances.

The maxim “be water” is rather Zen-like and is complementary to the concepts of Daoism as well, with the “way” (the *dao*, 道) being fluid, un-striving, and formless. But it also falls into what Hongkongers like to consider themselves as being – pragmatic and rational, who make the most of what they’ve got to reach their ultimate goal (that is, they “go with the flow”).

In Hong Kong’s current situation, it means that protests take many forms, and are adaptive (and reactive) to events on the ground. Initially, the first few protests were against a potential extradition law that would see people convicted of certain crimes being repatriated across the border, where justice is meted out rather differently to Hong Kong’s common law system. Now, the protests address wider concerns like lack of political reform, potential limits on freedom of speech, and the rule of law. You could say that the Hong Kong “water” is filling multiple channels that have gradually opened up over the last 22 years of Hong Kong as a Special Administrative Region of China (SAR) due to the conflicting nature of its “One Country, Two Systems” governance framework.

Protests are held all over Hong Kong, they are not static like the Occupy Central/Umbrella Movement that was fixed in only a few locations. Protest schedules are continually updated on social media. And these protests take many forms: traditional “big marches” like the annual 1st July march, commemorating the date that Hong Kong became an SAR. There are singalongs of a newly written Hong Kong “anthem”. There is the joining of hands across Hong Kong in a “Hong Kong Way”, mimicking the “Baltic Way” of 1989. And there are “Lennon Walls” of post-it notes all over the city, also harking back to the late 1980s and the original Lennon Wall of Prague.

The Hong Kong protests have been acknowledged as “leaderless”, in part because of the targeting of leaders in 2014, several of whom are now serving jail sentences. They are leaderless, yes, but in an East Asian society like Hong Kong, decisions were still made collectively. This was done through the various social media platforms, especially the Reddit-like LIHKG forum; decisions about what to do next were made by consensus. You could say this is a kind of informal “universal suffrage” or direct democracy.

Solidarity building with slogans and memes such as “be brave Hongkongers”, “come together, stay together”, is a continual process as an important means to keep people together, important in any social movement, especially “leaderless” ones.

The term “hand and feet” (手足) is used to refer to people taking part in protests and conveys the idea of unity. When the hands and feet of a protester are injured, other protesters feel his or her pain. A young female first-aider during an August protest got hit in the right eye with a projectile fired by police. This lodged inside her safety goggles, leaving her right eyeball ruptured. We all “became her”. The incident sparked a campaign that called for people to cover their right eye and post a photo on social media (#Eye4HK campaign). Many memes arose which featured a figure with the right eye covered.

There have also been several “Memorials”. One was for a protester who had accidentally fallen from a height, and others were for those who were considered to have taken their own lives in despair over Hong Kong’s situation. This also served to bring people together. The traditional colour of mourning, white, was worn by protesters on one memorial march, and for flowers placed at the sites of those who had lost their lives.

Ironically, a favoured response to the shout-out at protests of the phrase “Hong Kong Person” (香港人) is to “add oil” (加油), which means to “keep going, be strong, and don’t give up”. This call-and-response dyad builds solidarity amongst the massed group and renews hope when energy flags. And as we know, oil floats on water, and in Hong Kong now this acts as the “current” of encouragement, complementing the water (a particular protest action) below it, a particularly necessary energizer on the hot sticky days of a Hong Kong summer.

In some respects, the Hong Kong government, the elites (tycoons and others), and Beijing add their own “oil” to the protests by their actions towards the people. But this is not good oil. It is the oil of anger, which ironically also sparks up the indignation of the protesters to come out and protest once again.

Chief Executive Carrie Lam, Hong Kong’s head of government said in June:

If the young people have walked, and acted, and you still don’t give them what they want. Then what? The metaphor that I use is that I’m a mother who has two sons. If every time my son tells me he wants something and I acquiesce to his wishes, for a short time our relationship between mother and son will be very good, but once this child is grown, he will have regrets. He will ask “Mother, why didn’t you remind me then?”

Basically, to Carrie Lam, Hongkongers were unruly and wayward children. Mother knows best!

This statement could be classified as “traditional” Chinese thinking. That is the “strict father” or in this case it is the “strict mother” who knows what is best for his or her children. Children should obey. Needless to say, this didn’t go down well with the people of Hong Kong, particularly the younger members of society who were emboldened and politically awakened during the Occupy Central/Umbrella Movement of late 2014.

Later on a group of mothers calling themselves the “Hong Kong Mamas” quickly came together in response to the violence they saw meted out by the police in subsequent protests. They held their own rally, holding emotional signs such as “don’t shoot our kids”. Later on, a group of elderly persons formed a “Protect the Young People Group”, putting themselves in between the police and younger protesters.

As a predominately Chinese population whose familial origins lay in China but was governed under so-called benign liberal authoritarianism as a colony of Great Britain, this intersecting of Chinese cultural thinking and Western influence naturally had an effect on discourse vis-à-vis political change.

Typical rhetorical topics in Chinese discourse throughout the centuries have involved *harmony* (e.g., a harmonious society, illustrating continuity with the past; the need for consensus), *loyalty* (individual subordination to the collective), *Chinese vs. foreign* (outside forces threatening Chinese territory/sovereignty and the fostering of togetherness), and *stability* (which is connected to harmony and consensus). Hong Kong protesters have shown evidence of these in their actions – some of which have been discussed above – but with a unique Western-influenced slant.

The Hong Kong people, who had been promised a “high degree of autonomy” and that it would be “Hong Kong people ruling Hong Kong” once it became an SAR of China on 1st July 1997, now know that these promises are to be taken with a grain of salt.

But over time, and with increasing incidents like the “eye girl” incident, the “ethereal mist” mentioned earlier has become something more potent: steam. For as one person said in a post in one of the protest-related Facebook groups that I belong to had said, “we now not [cold] water, but hot water”. As we know, water heated to 100 degrees Celsius becomes steam.

Actions on the part of the Hong Kong government that have raised the temperature of protesters in Hong Kong relate to the excessive reaction and violence of the Hong Kong police in dealing with protesters. Videos abound of extreme overreaction to protestors’ actions. For example, the “kettling” of protesters in MTR stations (leaving people with no way to exit an area), beating an intellectually disabled man, a policeman saying that a video shows police “kicking a yellow object” (when actually it was clearly a human being), and so on. The riot squad known as “raptors” (in Chinese, literally “fast dragons”) is rumoured to be infiltrated with paramilitaries from Guangzhou. It is hard to believe that police in Hong Kong were once largely praised as “Asia’s finest”. Now, their reputation has almost been totally destroyed in the eyes of the general public.

But violence arose in the normally peaceful protests too. On 1st July 2019, early evening, many watched in shock as demonstrators stormed the Legislative Council complex, set about writing graffiti on walls, and draping the colonial-era flag of Hong Kong over the

President's chair. One particular piece of graffiti caught the eye – written in English – “You taught us that peaceful protests are useless.” These peaceful marches had taken place ever since the SAR was founded. No violence. But not much real political reform either. Earlier in the day a huge crowd had walked peacefully from Victoria Park in Causeway Bay to the council complex.

Martin Luther King Jr. is often considered to be synonymous with peaceful protest. In 1966 he explained that “non-violence is the most potent weapon available to the Negro in his struggle for freedom and justice.” Some felt that the protesters had lost the moral high ground with this latest action. As Chief Executive Carrie Lam herself put it in her 4am speech to the press on 2nd July 2019, the activity at the Legislative Council was an “extreme use of violence and vandalism” that shocked and saddened many.

If people find themselves being ignored continuously by their representatives, peacefully, what else can they do? Is it any wonder people are frustrated at being unheeded? Discussions about tactics, peaceful or violent, have continued ever since. The water has become a little choppy and rough. Then again, we know that police have gone undercover, dressing in black, the colour of these protests, pretending to be protesters, and we also need to mention the involvement of criminal gangs (triads). I don't discount that there are some “radical protesters” doing some violent acts. It's so hard to get a clear picture of what's going on.

“Apologies” and “thank yous” were especially given in the early days in the form of memes and posters, showing the protesters' concern for others: “We sincerely apologize for the inconvenience caused at this peaceful protest”, one such poster read. Apologies were given to various sectors of Hong Kong society when they were inconvenienced, but it was emphasized that the inconvenience was for the greater good. At airport protests, where international travellers were involved, efforts were made to make the travellers aware of Hong Kong's situation and assistance was made available them where necessary. There seem to be fewer apologies given now as things have escalated, and there is more anger and violence.

To summarize, the Occupy Central/Umbrella Movement, which began five years ago on 28th September 2014, ended without any major government concessions. But it was a political awakening of sorts. The younger generation stepped up to become much more politically involved, while the old guard retreated to a certain extent, still playing a role, but no longer on the frontlines. The stagnant water had been replenished with sweet spring water.

The water is still flowing, and oil of various types is continually being added to it. Nothing has been settled yet, but “hell money” (fake money burned to help the deceased have a good life in the underworld) was seen strewn across the streets of central Hong Kong on 1st October 2019, the national day of China.

Hong Kong's summer of protests is now turning into an autumn of protests.
No end in sight.

Note: This commentary was last edited on 15th of October 2019.