



# ASIA MAIOR

Vol. XXXI / 2020

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## Asia in 2020: Coping with COVID-19 and other crises

Edited by  
**Michelguglielmo Torri**  
**Nicola Mocci**  
**Filippo Boni**

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A large, intricate, light-colored mandala graphic is positioned on the right side of the cover, partially overlapping the text area. It features complex, repeating geometric and floral patterns.



CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

# ASIA MAIOR

The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989

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## BORDERS IN REVOLT: HONG KONG YOUTH AND CONTESTED SOVEREIGNTY

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Au Loong-Yu, *Hong Kong in Revolt: The Protest Movement and the Future of China*, London: Pluto Press, 2020, 216 pp. (ISBN 9780745341460).

*Hong Kong in Revolt* is one of several recent book-length studies providing an overview of the 2019 movement. Hong Kong labour activist Au Loong-Yu unfolds the diversity and complexity of the movement to international readers from a left-wing perspective. As an analyst and an active participant, Au considers the 2019 revolt a genuinely progressive political movement with diverse tendencies, even though it lacked strategies and democratic deliberation. The book dispels common misunderstandings shared by some leftists both in China and the West. It clarifies that the 2019 movement was a spontaneous and leaderless movement demanding Hong Kong identity and autonomy. Among various social groups participating in the movement, the book highlights the critical role of youth, who had been increasingly politicized and radicalized since the 2000s.

Apart from documenting the 2019 revolt, Au makes a vital contribution toward envisioning a long-term struggle for Hong Kong. Firstly, he criticizes three popular slogans that treat Hong Kong's future independently from Beijing. «Beijing versus Hong Kong» is one of the most dominant discourses deployed by the pan-democrats and the upper class.<sup>1</sup> Au criticizes this discourse for neglecting social inequality, and the interests of the working people in Hong Kong. Two other slogans, a «revolution within a city» and the historically baseless «independence» are also impractical for future

1. «Pan-democrats» refer to a Hong Kong political alignment that supports democracy and embraces liberal values. They are the minority camp within the Legislative Council in Hong Kong, and are often known as «opposition camp». According to Au, «pan-democrats have a strong connection with the professional middle class: politicians, civil servants, academics, lawyers, accountants, businesspersons, and so on». Au thinks that local Tycoons and most of the so-called middle-upper class do not support the call for democracy.



struggle. Hence, Au proposes that for the working people, a new vision of Hong Kong should include the values of identity and autonomy as well as distributive justice and democracy. Further, he prefigures a grassroots alliance between Hong Kongers and mainland subalterns.

The book comprises five chapters. Chapter one surveys the 2019 movement and divides it into four stages: the prelude (February to May), taking off (June and July), the climax (August and September), and the stalemate (October to December). It details the movement's evolution from the demand for the withdrawal of the extradition bill into «the great battle to defend Hong Kong's autonomy» (p. 31). Chapter two lists various actors with different political inclinations participating in the movement, including the local tycoons, the 1997 generation, students, women, immigrants, ethnic minorities, and others. Chapter three details some critical protests during the 2019 revolt, aptly referring to media reports and the author's conversations and discussions with the participants. Chapter four examines the movement's tactics and convincingly analyses the movement's organizational limits and inadequate democratic practices. Chapter five probes Hong Kong's future struggles in relation to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

One key theme of *Hong Kong in Revolt* is the politicization of the youth who have gradually cultivated political consciousness and become the protagonists of the movement in 2019. While its previous generations were usually apolitical and conservative, the young generation has been increasingly politicized and radicalized since 1997, a year that marked Hong Kong's handover and the Asian economic crisis. As Au demonstrates, Hong Kong youth rising in revolt was because of Beijing's broken promise of Hong Kong autonomy and universal suffrage, rather than their dissatisfaction over domestic social, economic, or educational problems (p. 57). The young generation has accumulated long-term anger and despair for not being able to decide their own fate. The youth, who got their first political enlightenment and training from the Umbrella Movement (p. 53), channelled their strong sentiments of anger and despair into the massive political and existential revolt in 2019.

Au breaks down some misconceptions of the young protesters in chapter four. A small number of young protesters waved the UK and US flags and used the «alt-right» symbols<sup>2</sup> during the movement. These actions were considered politically suspect by the left both in China and the West.

2. The «alt-right», abbreviation of «alternative right», is a right-wing ideological movement characterized by a rejection of mainstream politics and by the use of online media to disseminate provocative content, often expressing opposition to racial, religious, or gender equality. For example, while the cartoon «Pepe the Frog» is considered a hate symbol used by white supremacists in the west, it was widely used by the protesters in Hong Kong to symbolize the movement. As Au and others commentators said, the original connotation of these symbols has been changed in the context of Hong Kong.

However, Au demonstrates that using these tactics did not mean that the protesters were necessarily from the far-right; it was because the young generation was inexperienced and new to political practice. They had become politicized only recently as chapter one explains; they tended to rely on their instincts and act from their intuition in the movement. Au argues that the movement's limits were not the tactics young protesters used but their lack of democratic deliberation and strategies.

Furthermore, the author criticizes the binary concept of «materialism and post-materialism» that some Hong Kong scholars deploy to understand the politicization of the 1997 generation. Borrowing from Ronald Inglehart's «silent revolution» theory,<sup>3</sup> the liberals and the localists<sup>4</sup> argue that the 1997 generation has shifted from prioritizing economic values to post-material values, including lifestyle concerns, individual freedom, and self-actualization. However, Au thinks the dichotomy of materialism and post-materialism is arbitrary, as material values and post-material values cannot be completely separated in Hong Kong over the past four decades. More importantly, Au condemns the usage of Inglehart's theory to explain the youth rebellion, which fails to acknowledge «the very materialistic issues of wealth distribution, long working hours, low wages, and the lack of a decent pension» (p. 148). In saying that the young protesters were only interested in «post-materialist values» the author argues that the liberals and the localists further facilitated the hegemony of upper-middle classes and prevented the lower class from understanding the real roots of their exploitation (p. 149).

Therefore, Au calls for bringing a class dimension in analyzing the rise of the youth movement. As Au emphasizes, youth is not a monolithic category and it is differentiated based on gender, class, and ethnicity. The prioritization of the post-material values should not ignore the material needs of the working-class youth, who have to struggle for making ends meet. Au urges the youth not to be fooled by the upper-middle classes who only wanted to maintain the status quo under the institution of Basic Law.

Another key theme highlighted in the book is the development of Hong Kong identity in the 2019 revolt. Beijing's escalated offensive policy toward Hong Kong resulted in increased identification with Hong Kong rather than China, creating a new sense of common belonging and destiny that had never formed in the last century of history.<sup>5</sup> The strong identifi-

3. Ronald Inglehart, *The Silent Revolution: Changing Values and Political Styles Among Western Publics*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1977.

4. According to Au, the term «localist» refers to a broad current in Hong Kong society which emphasizes the importance of Hong Kong lifestyle, individual freedom, and self-actualization as unique local values.

5. Wing-sang Lau provides a profound historical interpretation in analyzing the construction of Hong Kong identity. He deploys the concept of *deferred decolonization* to articulate the emergence of a new identity since the 2000s. See Wing-sang Lau,

cation with the city also creates a sense of «Hong Kong community» constructed by shared feelings of anger, anxiety, despair, and dissolution. Hong Kong scholar Ching Kiu Chan has written that a new structure of feeling has formed over the past decade in Hong Kong.<sup>6</sup> Thus, Au notes that the new generation's anger and pride in being Hong Kongers «gives it the necessary incentive and energy to fight the police and thus elevate the anti-extradition bill movement into a great battle to defend Hong Kong's autonomy» (p. 58).

Hong Kong identity was mixed with a xenophobic discourse; but the book makes critical efforts to clarify that the 2019 revolt was *not* a right-wing xenophobic movement targeting China or seeking independence. Similar to the rest of the world, localism in Hong Kong's context is different from nativism. It has emerged since the turn of the century and covers a broad spectrum with multiple contradictions, including advocacy for local values and Hong Kong's autonomy, and resisting urban redevelopment plans. A new kind of localism advocating for Hong Kong identity has emerged since 2007. The right-wing and anti-immigrant nativists<sup>7</sup>, as Au argues, were only one small strand of localism and did not gain much support in Hong Kong. They failed to obtain any authority in the 2019 revolt.

Au argues that demanding the common identity of Hong Kongers and Hong Kong's autonomy should be the direction for a long-term struggle. Nativists, though accounting for only one-tenth of Hong Kong's population, insist that the movement should fight for Hong Kong's independence. The author disagrees with this position, arguing that such demands are divisive and explosive. Demands for a «Hong Kong nation» and independence could antagonize mainland immigrants and exclude those self-identified as «Chinese» which Au thinks «could not be democratic nor feasible» (p.169). Besides, Au criticizes the vision of Hong Kong independence for its lack of class analysis. In defending Hong Kong's autonomy, the upper classes' aim is to maintain the status quo without challenging capitalist relations, which do not correspond to working people's interests. Therefore, from a leftist point of view, Au proposes that the working people's vision of a new Hong Kong should be guided by not only the values of identity and self-determination, but also the values of democracy and distributive justice (p. 171). Demanding Hong Kong identity, self-determination, and distributive justice is a more democratic strategy that could mobilize wider social groups.

'Decolonization deferred: Hong Kong Identity in Historical Perspective', in Wai-man Lam & Luke Cooper (eds.), *Citizenship, Identity and Social Movements in the New Hong Kong. Localism after the Umbrella Movement*, London: Routledge, 2018, pp. 13-33.

6. Ching-Kiu Chan, 'A Hong Kong Critique of Identity: Belonging and Becoming in the Aberrant Post-Colony', *Situations*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 2020, pp. 169-97.

7. According to Au, «nativists» and «xenophobic localists» refer to «a more specific group of clearly right-wing and anti-immigrant localists». Raymond Wong, the scholar Chin Wan, and Wong Yeung-tat were known as «xenophobic trio». For a more detailed account on nativists in Hong Kong, see chapter one of *Hong Kong in Revolt*.

The author also emphasizes that regarding the asymmetric power relations between Beijing and Hong Kong, working people of Hong Kong should also seek alliances with the grassroots from mainland China.

Indeed, as the title of the book suggests, any discussions of Hong Kong's movement cannot be separated from the future of China. After the handover in 1997, Hong Kong fully converged with China's future, under the exceptional formula of «one country, two systems». The discourse of «Beijing vs Hong Kong» backed up by the local tycoons and the upper class was quite powerful and popular. The pan-democrats also tacitly used such a political spectrum until 2014. Nevertheless, Au finds such a binary dichotomy between Beijing and Hong Kong somewhat problematic. It implies that the enemy threatening Hong Kongers was only from the outside, namely Beijing. Yet, as chapter five points out, local tycoons, whose role was very ambiguous, have been working closely with Beijing for decades in pursuit of their interests. Au notes that Hong Kong and Beijing are not opposite parties, as they both have the same version of capitalism and both lack democratic practices. Secondly, the «Beijing vs Hong Kong» dichotomy conceals local social and class contradictions. For the author, the local tycoons and the upper-middle-class «fooled» the working population in Hong Kong and used the working people to bargain with Beijing to maintain the status quos under the Basic Law. By replacing «Beijing vs Hong Kong», with «left vs right», Au urges the middle and working class to face up to the issue of distributive injustice.

*Hong Kong in Revolt* examines Hong Kong's struggle in relation to the future of China from a leftist perspective, and this is an important contribution. However, its analysis of China is arguable. According to the author, Xi's China is «a bureaucratic capitalist country» composed of «both premodern and modern elements». The building of the «imperial» politics of CCP today (Xi as an emperor) has roots in its premodern elements. Thus, Au thinks it is precisely the pre-modern features of the CCP that «bog down its very functioning» and exposes the weakness of the Party-State.

However, we argue that such an ethnocentric argument is problematic, as it assumes that there is only one model of modernity. China presents a kind of modernity and modernization with a distinct logic. In recent years, China's modernity has been prominently centered around the concept of sovereignty. After the 2008 global crisis, China formulated a so-called «China model» (*zhongguo moshi*) whose meanings are vague and ambiguous. Since Xi came to power in 2013, the «China model» has been reformulated as the «China solution» (*zhongguo fangan*). Hong Kong is a part of Xi's «China solution». The «China solution» offers a definition of sovereignty and a clear ideological framework that justify internal colonization politics (Hong Kong and Xinjiang above all) and connect the former with imperial projection, at least in the South China Sea geopolitical context. The «China solution», as Sebastian Veg notes, is backed up by a new statist ideology that

places State power as the supreme political principle above the constitution and law.<sup>8</sup> As such, sovereignty here is tightly related to Schmitt's concept<sup>9</sup> that sovereignty decides the «state of exception» and distinguishes friends from enemies. Resort to the state of exception is justified through creating an «internal» enemy who is often claimed to be supported by (evil) external foreign forces. Against the will of the entire population in Hong Kong, Beijing implemented the National Security Law on 1 July 2020, which marked the 23rd year of Hong Kong handover to China.

Thus, for Beijing, «China's solution» is a project and a vision of the future, not a return to a pre-modern imperial «atavism», which, according to Au, refers to a fusion of modern capitalist command and pre-modern authoritarian political control. According to Alessandro Russo and Claudia Pozzana,<sup>10</sup> as Chinese power evolved from socialism to post-socialism, there is a «double system of authority»: the capitalist authority is prescriptive, and the CCP authority is interdictive. In the case of Hong Kong, CCP strengthens its interdictive power, aiming to become the only political authority organizing society. The repressive reaction to the revolt, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the geopolitical tensions accelerate Beijing's interdictive action. However, Russo's analysis of the power of the interdictive authority is insufficient to understand struggles over identity recognition. Hong Kong's 2019 revolt intensified the tensions resulting from demands for cultural and identity differences that Xi's notion of sovereignty denies. Au clearly explains how localism is not reducible to xenophobic nativism in chapter five. He points out that identity is marked by difference, not homogeneity. In this sense, demanding the recognition of cultural difference is a struggle interrelated with democratic practices, which makes the intersected issues of class, gender and race open out in social conflict. Beijing's new statist ideology manifested in the «China solution» denies differences. As its discourse is constituted by the Manichean dichotomies of friend-enemy and the internal-external, it must reduce the multitude to the oneness of the State and refuses to recognize cultural, social, and political heterogeneity.

The revolt in Hong Kong and the future of China are interconnected with global conditions. Au briefly mentions Occupy Wall Street and Gilets Jaunes when analyzing the organizational limits of the movement; but we would argue that it is necessary to link up Hong Kong's revolt with the

8. Sebastian Veg, 'The Rise of China's Statist Intellectuals: Law, Sovereignty, and «Repoliticization»', *The China Journal*, Vol. 82, July 2019, pp. 23-45.

9. Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

10. Alessandro Russo & Claudia Pozzana, 'Hong Kong. «Due sistemi», una guerra incombente?', *Sinosphere*, 26 July 2019, (<https://sinosphere.com/2020/07/26/claudia-pozzana-e-alessandro-russo-hong-kong-due-sistemi-una-guerra-incombente>). See also: Alessandro Russo, *Cultural Revolution and Revolutionary Culture*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2020.

recent two decades of global revolts. Indeed, there is a clear connection between the spirit of *que se vayan todos!* (All of them must go!) of nearly two decades ago and the outcry of *I can't breathe* of 2020 – the former signals government's complete separation from the people, and the latter is a political affirmation demanding the right to life.

We think that to situate the revolt only under the framework of revolution is insufficient in assessing the potential resources that Hong Kong revolt can leave to future, because the «revolution paradigm» only considers the revolutionary organizational and political lack of a revolt. A recent essay written by Donatella Di Cesare<sup>11</sup> offers an incisive perspective on the nature of global revolts. According to Di Cesare, a revolt is not a lack or a kind of inability to organize a revolution, but is a political event that has its proper language. First of all, it opens a new urban and digital space. When in revolt, the space that used to be monopolized by the state and controlled by the police's violence is now literally free from control, so that new community experiences and practices can emerge.

A revolt not only temporarily occupies public and common space, but also establishes a new time different from the temporality of modernity defined by the state as a teleological project of civilization and progress. Subverting the capitalist and political order in urban spaces (streets, plazas, shopping plazas and even the Great Bay Area, the urbanizing project connecting Guangdong Province, Hong Kong and Macau) means the subversion of the time order imposed by the state and by the law of accumulation and valorisation. In this sense, the Hong Kong revolt was more effective than the conflicts that have taken place in China over the last decade. The 2019 revolt reminds us of the weakening presence of mainland China's civil society organizations and labour organizations. These organizations failed because they faced harsh state repression or lacked organizational ability, and because they limited their struggles within the discourse and the order instituted by the state. The time that a revolt opens is not dialectical and cannot be measured by History; a revolt does not produce those radical transformations typically produced by a revolution (in economic, political and social structures), on the contrary it must be intended as a potential source of future changes and progresses.

In this sense, notwithstanding state repression and the deep depression the city experienced after July 2020, the Hong Kong revolt opens up futures that once were unthinkable. It propagates cultural, political, and existential resources fuelling the above-mentioned plurality that can challenge the Chinese sovereignty. In addition to the new urban space and a new non-linear time, the revolt in Hong Kong also connects diasporic fluxes, transforming borders into new centres: the waves surged from the Hong Kong revolt dispersed to Taiwan, Thailand, South East Asia. Politically and

11. Donatella Di Cesare, *Il Tempo della Rivolta*, Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2020.

existentially, a revolt destroys the presumption of a natural relation between state and citizen, because there is no contract or original cultural unity that can fix the cultural and political belongings. The Hong Kong revolt prefigures a community based on subverting institutional order. This is a political response to the CCP's obsession with stability above all. A revolt is to subvert, not establish. It is reforms or revolutions that have the task of establishing new institutions. Hence, the Hong Kong revolt neither lacked nor failed, as it subverted the temporality and spatiality of the State.