



Making Sense of the Umbrella Moment in Hong Kong: Hope, Uncertainties, and Possible Pathways Ahead

Introduction: What is Happening and not Happening in Hong Kong

In Hong Kong, a famously non-political metropolis, it has been truly remarkable to see tens of thousands occupying three key locations in the city for over a week with myriads of creative posters, entertainment, and colours. Traffic has been brought to a halt, pollution has suddenly dipped, and a sense of traditional community has invaded the core of one of the planet's top financial centers. Even more remarkable is the very tense situation and occasional confrontations that have persisted to this day. Students have maintained order and civility, even establishing recycling systems and cleaning streets. Despite the dangers of radicalization among various groups, ranging from high school students (Scholarism), university students (university student federation), Occupy Central leaders (Benny Tai and Chan Kin-Man), and democratic parties, the students have generally known when to back down to avoid escalation. For example, on Friday, October 3 they chose not to execute their ultimatum to take over government buildings. The police and the Hong Kong government have also, for the most part, shown patience and tolerance.

While firmly sticking to the ruling issued by the NPC in principle, Beijing has signaled its intention to be patient and to leave the situation to the Hong Kong government and Hong Kong police.

In order to understand developments in Hong Kong, it is important to note what the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement is *not* about. It is not a replay of the 1989 demonstrations in Beijing's Tiananmen Square, as restraint is now guiding all key players. It is also not the collapse of the Hong Kong social order and system: the Hong Kong rule of law and media freedom (including social media) remain intact. Freedom of assembly is also still allowed in Hong Kong. Business evaluations of Hong Kong's strategic positions have not been affected. In fact, even the tough position taken by the Mainland-based National People's Congress on June 10, with its White Paper, and in late August, with its ruling on the 2017 election method, remains within the boundaries of the Joint Declaration of 1984 between the UK and China over the return of Hong Kong to China in 1997 and the Basic Law promulgated in April 1990 to serve as Hong Kong's constitution.¹

So, Hong Kong has maintained its unique and impressive social, economic, and legal systems with freedoms that go beyond what are available in Mainland China. For example, Hong Kong

¹ Article 45 of the Basic Law did specify: "the ultimate aim is the selection of the Chief Executive by universal suffrage upon nomination by a broadly representative nominating committee in accordance with democratic procedures." But the word "ultimate" did not commit Beijing to 2017. As well, the earlier part of Article 45 says that "the method for selecting the Chief Executive shall be specified in the light of the actual situation in the HKSAR and in accordance with the principle of gradual and orderly progress."



citizens are the only Chinese citizens who can hold dual or multiple citizenships in addition to their Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR) passport.

The hope or the fear that the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement can trigger a 'colour revolution' in the rest of China is also misplaced. Sympathy for the Hong Kong protests is low in Mainland China and even among the Chinese-Canadian community of mainland origins. It is therefore not a question of controlled media, but more a feeling that the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement is about protecting the Hong Kong way of life and not about the future of China. The colonial history of Hong Kong has also left some ambivalent feelings between the communities, and this ambivalence creates a buffer. On the other hand, there has been more sympathy from and impact in Taiwan, including increasingly close ties between student organizations in Hong Kong and student leaders from the Sunflower Movement (April 2014) in Taiwan.

Root Causes of the Hong Kong Crisis

The Hong Kong Umbrella Movement is a diverse and plural movement without centralized leadership. Several waves of leaders have sought to lead it or harness it, including current democratic parties in Hong Kong, Occupy Central leaders, and university and high school groups. But in reality, nobody is in charge, a fact that has hampered decision-making as the movement has been winding down. The movement is a collection of groups with diverse motivating factors. Four distinct root causes drive this movement:

- **The perception of rising inequality and decreasing opportunities for young people.** The movement expresses a sense of economic and social crisis in the Hong Kong model. Occupy Central leaders took their cue from Occupy Wall Street. Many want to stand up against an economic structure dominated by a small business elite (initially co-opted by the British), as well as key problems like pollution and conservatism.
- **Concern over the mainlandization of Hong Kong.** Inhabitants feel that there are being overrun by Mainlanders. It is true that the number of tourists from the Mainland has sky-rocketed, and many are wealthy and have greater purchasing power than your average Hong Konger. This has turned the tables on the traditional social hierarchy. Only Shenzhen residents have free access to Hong Kong, but other wealthy urban Chinese have obtained access as well.
- **Frustration with the lack of innovation and proactivity in addressing new social, environmental, and economic problems.** Young people in particular attribute this both to a lack of accountability of the Chief Executive and to control by a small conservative business elite (that happens to control the Selection Committee for the Chief Executive).
- **Desire for the establishment of a "real democracy,"** which would, in their view, bring greater accountability and better governance to the island.

The umbrella crisis in Hong Kong further reveals that the old governance model crafted in 1984 and 1989 is too rigid and too slow to adapt to a fast changing young modern society. The model was a pact between Beijing and the economic ruling class of Hong Kong to maintain order, the rule of law, and to prevent the adoption of any anti-Beijing policies. The 30-year-old equilibrium has now been stretched to the limit; it must evolve and be renegotiated. This process, however, is a one that requires deliberation and institutional innovation.



Finally, the battle for the future of Hong Kong is happening on the backdrop of a clash between two grand narratives: the narrative of Hong Kong awakening vs. the narrative of the Chinese Dream, enunciated by Chinese President Xi Jinping and his reformist team. Both are genuine and occurring in parallel. What Xi seems to be attempting to do is no less than a massive rebalancing of the economic and social-environmental model of China before it crashes on the shoals of the middle-income trap and toxic inequality. He is trying to do this by taking on powerful vested interest groups and maintaining overall order. It is not yet a great political reform, but it is still a remarkable process with huge stakes for the global economy and for the world community. It is a gradual process, but few policy experts have come up with an alternative that stood a better chance of shifting the unsustainable Chinese socio-economic model.

Hong Kong's Umbrella leaders have not sought to relate to the predicament of reformers in China. But there is room for crafting a win-win pathway between such reformers and Hong Kong reformers, if both sides are willing to explore the links. Two great narratives are clashing now, but they are talking past each other. These two parallel views of history may not necessarily lead to a clash, if the right political entrepreneurs and the institutional innovations are present.

Proximate Causes of the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement

Apart from the deep-rooted causes enunciated above, three proximate causes lie behind the battle for Hong Kong of Fall 2014: mistrust between Hong Kong's emerging classes and Beijing; weak institutional networks between the two sides; and institutional gaps.

Mistrust and misperceptions played a key role throughout 2014, leading up to the events of August-October 2014. But the origins of this mistrust go back to the Tiananmen events in 1989. The June 4, 1989 tragedy changed the course of history for the relationship between Hong Kong and mainland China in deep institutional ways. One million people took to the streets that year (more than in 2014), and anniversaries of the event have brought hundreds of thousands together. In Hong Kong, 1989 led to the rise of Democratic leaders like Martin Lee and to the growing voice of the Democratic Party, although this genesis fused the pro-democracy camp with anti-Beijing positions.² On the Mainland China side, the massive mobilization in Hong Kong led to new fears that Hong Kong would become a subversive base against China, and this led to a new approach. On July 11, 1989, Secretary General Jiang Zemin quoted an old Chinese proverb to send a powerful message: "*well water should not interfere with river water.*"³

² 1989 led to fast Hong Kong emigration and even led to a strong feeling of guilt in the UK. The immediate reaction was a package from Governor Wilson to commit to massive change (new universities, new airport, but also the Bill of Rights, and move toward sunset political reforms). Other British reactions included the nomination of combative Governor Chris Patten and the removal of key China adviser Percy Cradock in 1992.

³ The twist of fate was that the Basic Law was in the midst of the drafting process. The new mood in Beijing led to key changes in the draft, including edits to Article 45 (quoted above) and the new anti-sedition Article 23 that would lead to such dramatic demonstrations in Hong Kong in 2003. Hong Kong never fully recovered,



Fast-tracking to October 2014, it is clear that in some quarters in Beijing, particularly the NPC Chairmanship, took the same position. “Any attempt to launch a “colour revolution” on the mainland from Hong Kong would be futile, *People’s Daily* warned as the Occupy Central movement entered its seventh day.⁴” As a result, some members of the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement have invoked the Tiananmen image, and Beijing has shown visible rigidity.

Second, and related to this deep mistrust, the lack of networks between Democratic leaders (young and senior) in Beijing, especially in comparison to Hong Kong business leaders, has been damaging to the process of negotiations between emerging groups in Hong Kong and Beijing. Young middle-class elites in Hong Kong and their leaders have not been able to transmit their true goals and intentions to the leadership in Beijing. They have not found a way to credibly commit to improved governance in Hong Kong (with better accountability) without the threat of foreign intrusion and messianic intentions toward the Mainland. To people who understand and sympathize with the democratic reformers in Hong Kong, this should be obvious. But the message has not passed to Beijing because the networks for transmitting that message do not exist. In turn, the lack of access to Beijing has led democratic leaders to grandstand on principles and absolute rights, triggering even more suspicion in Beijing. A cycle of mistrust and misperception has ensued. Taking the message to Washington, Ottawa, and London instead of working with Beijing has not helped. The deepening links between Sunflower movement leaders in Taiwan and Hong Kong students has further aroused defensive reactions by Beijing and the Hong Kong government.

Finally, this recent crisis in Hong Kong has revealed an institutional failure, namely the absence of the right platform for debate and deliberation between Hong Kong’s emerging social forces, the Hong Kong government, and relevant Beijing participants. The right people have not been able to meet in a room to deliberate over the future of Hong Kong to set out a pathway that all sides could work with. Indirect access to Beijing through a fragile Chief Executive have further complicated the issue.

Conclusion –The Need for a New Hong Kong Model

The Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong has highlighted a crisis of governance in Hong Kong. There is no immediate fix that can be agreed upon in a week. The best outcome would be a credible commitment to a process over a year or two that could develop a grand bargain. Most of this would require a change of the NPC ruling, and there remains maneuvering room, even without a change in the NPC’s ruling (which is very hard to obtain). Ideally, the way out of the crisis would involve three things:

- A process for negotiations and allowing the Hong Kong governance model to evolve over time, possibly facilitated by think tanks and universities in a track 1.5 pattern;
- A bargaining forum within Hong Kong, along with complementing networks and processes with Beijing;

since the Tian An Men shock became institutionalized in the DNA and political structure of Hong Kong.

⁴ South China Morning Post. Oct 5 – “Forget about starting a Chinese ‘colour revolution’ in Hong Kong, *People’s Daily* blasts.” ww.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/



- The forging of thicker ties between Hong Kong Democrats and Beijing reformers, which could help demonstrate that good governance in Hong Kong and accountable leadership would be of value to Xi Jinping in helping him advance his reform agenda. Democrats would also need to accept a few compromises and guarantees of non-foreign intervention.

Because there are 300,000 Canadian citizens (most of Hong Kong origin) living in Hong Kong, and about 500,000 people of Hong Kong descent living in Canada, we have a big stake in the events playing out in Hong Kong. Vancouver and Toronto are deeply connected with Hong Kong business and people-to-people networks. Canadian business has a large stake in the events. In addition, the debate among people in Hong Kong people and between Hong Kong people and Mainland Chinese is taking place intensely in Canada as well. Chinese-language social media and print media in Canada expose the disagreements between Chinese-Canadians of different origins. Canadian Universities like UBC, the University of Toronto, McGill, and others have just experienced lively and civil debates that pit students of Hong Kong origins against students of Mainland origins.

In its official response to the situation in Hong Kong, Canada should stand by the principles of rule of law, the protection of human freedom and rights, and the orderly process set out in the Basic Law. It should also continue to encourage restraint and the absolute importance of sticking to peaceful means, including in the government response. Yet, it is also important to remain aware of the longer-term game and of the bigger picture of the ongoing Chinese reforms. Fixing the Hong Kong model is a long-term process. Meeting the expectations of Hong Kong's society requires a careful and feasible pathway.

About Yves Tiberghien

Yves Tiberghien (Ph.D. Stanford University, 2002) is an Associate Professor of Political Science and Director of the Institute of Asian Research at the University of British Columbia. Yves was an Academy Scholar at Harvard University in 2004-2006. He has also been a Japan Foundation Scholar at the Japanese Ministry of Finance and at Keio University. He specializes in East Asian comparative political economy, international political economy, and global governance, with an empirical focus on China, Japan, and Korea. He is the author of *Entrepreneurial States: Reforming Corporate Governance in France, Japan, and Korea* (Cornell University Press in the Political Economy Series) and of *L'Asie et le futur du monde*, Paris: Science Po Press, 2012; and *Leadership in Global Institution-Building: Minerva's Rule*, edited volume, Palgrave MacMillan, 2013).

Yves did extensive research on the Hong Kong handover process in 1996 and 1997 as a Stanford Fellow at the Law School Center on Cooperation and Negotiations. As part of that research, he met with over 30 party and political leaders at the time.