



2019 Hong Kong anti-extradition bill protest. Image reproduced under a Creative Commons license. Courtesy Studio Incendo on flickr.

Hong Kong Studies in the future continuous tense

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On 16 June 2019, Hong Kong caught the world's attention when reportedly two million people took to the streets to force, among others, the Chief Executive to officially shelf the extradition bill that, as widely believed by Hong Kong people, would jeopardize the 'one country, two systems' framework of the Special Administrative Region. Four days before the history-making rally, the government tried pushing through the immensely controversial bill despite heated opposition. Had it not been for the lockdown of the Legislative Council building due to crowds of angry protestors who were brutally dispersed by countless rounds of tear gas and rubber bullets, the bill would have been passed, and the title of this essay might have arguably become *Hong Kong Studies in the past tense*.

A perfect storm

According to Albert Chen, Cheng Chan Lan Yue Professor in Constitutional Law at the University of Hong Kong, the attempt to push through the extradition bill that involves a rendition arrangement between Hong Kong and Mainland China, "generated a 'perfect storm' in Hong Kong that was completely unnecessary and avoidable".¹ While I agree that this 'perfect storm' was avoidable, I would also argue that more controversies will evolve as Hong Kong has been hopelessly bound by the unprecedented confluence of neoliberal capitalism and state capitalism in the age of China. The conflicts as well as collusion between two capitalisms have generated a persistent storm in the Special Administrative Region. The recent US-China trade dispute, which is not just about trade, may usher in a new era of 'one world two systems' global order, and Hong Kong, an inseparable part of China and its window to the world, would be trapped in the eye of the storm. That said, this essay focuses on Hong Kong Studies rather than the extradition saga – and how that will end is still anyone's guess.

Hong Kong's increasingly marginal, minor position, especially after the Umbrella Movement and the subsequent (s)election of Carrie Lam as the new Chief Executive in 2017, has become a predicament as well as condition for the Special Administrative Region. In his speech delivered after he inaugurated the new Hong Kong administration on the final day of his three-day visit to Hong Kong to mark the 20th anniversary of the resumption of Chinese sovereignty, President Xi Jinping addressed Hong Kong as a "plural society" with "different views and even major differences on some issues"; however, he also warned that "any attempt to endanger China's sovereignty and security, challenge the power of the central government", or to "use Hong Kong to carry out infiltration and sabotage against the Mainland is an act that crosses the red line and is absolutely impermissible".² By 'red line' he was making it clear that the Central People's Government has zero tolerance for challenges to its authority.

Meanwhile, after Hong Kong's reversion to China in 1997, both China and the West wanted to retain Hong Kong's status as a "capital of free-wheeling capital",³ and therefore spawned a myth of status quo that 'froze' Hong Kong as a commercial city. According to, for example, the official website of the Greater Bay Area administered by the Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Bureau: "Hong Kong will facilitate and support the economic development of the region, with a view to enhancing the role and functions of the Greater Bay Area in the country's two-way opening up".⁴ Finance, trade, and STEM education are held in esteem, given that the emphasis is on economic development. At this particular juncture, integration with the Mainland, whether Hong Kong likes it or not, has become a

topic that is of the utmost importance for any consideration of the future of Hong Kong culture and the city per se. In order not to become a mere part of Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area Studies, it is pertinent for Hong Kong Studies to respond to the Greater Bay Area blueprint.

Hong Kong-Mainland integration

Whether the plurality of Hong Kong culture and society will disappear or not is a key question to ask as Beijing has become more proactive in incorporating the Special Administrative Regions of Hong Kong and Macau into the Mainland. However, it is wrong to argue that Hong Kong Studies as an academic discipline is emerging "as an area studies field in its own right, edging out from the shadows of China Studies" after the Umbrella Movement in 2014.⁵ To set the record straight, the Hong Kong Studies Programme, an academic programme that offers B.A., M.Phil. and Ph.D. curricula at the University of Hong Kong, was launched in 2013 (not to mention those Hong Kong Studies-related research programmes and centres, such as the Hong Kong Cultural Studies project of The Chinese University of Hong Kong launched in 1993, over the past few decades; more details are provided in Elizabeth Sinn's 'Reflections on Some Early Moments in Hong Kong Studies', her keynote address delivered at the First Annual Meeting of the Society for Hong Kong Studies.⁶ The desire to understand the distinctive culture of this former British colony seems to still be haunted by the spectre of Orientalism, which sees only what one wants to see.

Although the emergence of Hong Kong Studies should not be understood only in the aftermath of the Umbrella Movement, it is not unreasonable to see Hong Kong Studies as a discipline to refuse to let Hong Kong characteristics be gone in the age of China. I have argued elsewhere that "[g]iven the continuous disappearance of Hong Kong and its cultures, it is important for Hong Kong Studies to imagine how to keep its erasure—which seems inevitable in the age of China—visible/legible".⁷ At the same time, however, it is equally important to remember that it is not possible for Hong Kong Studies to move out of China's shadows. Just take the above-mentioned annual meeting of the Society for Hong Kong Studies as a convenient example. Most if not all of the twenty panels featured papers in one way or another related to China.

Back in the 1990s, people might have thought Hong Kong would be able to change China. Now that China has changed (but not by Hong Kong), if not become, the world, Hong Kong must rethink its future in this special context. Inspired by Lawrence Grossberg's *Cultural Studies in the Future Tense*, which offers "a modest proposal for future formations of cultural studies",⁸ I would use this essay as a prolegomenon to explore

the future work of Hong Kong Studies. For the future of Cultural Studies, Grossberg highlighted the importance of going beyond the established Eurocentric border. Hong Kong Studies, trapped in the 'perfect storm' mentioned above, must be inscribed between Eurocentric and Sinocentric borders.

Imagining a future

As perceptively noted by Arif Dirlik in 'The Rise of China and the End of the World as We Know It', the PRC is a rising power in search of a paradigm that may provide an identity of its own that may also be appealing to others.⁹ Its paradigm appeals to others by following international standards, but in some respects only. Because Hong Kong is the place where the impact of the rise of China is most acutely felt, a proactive consideration of the role of Hong Kong Studies within emerging formations of global modernity with Chinese characteristics would be inevitable. What has made Hong Kong distinctive in the world is not only its role in global capitalism, which is in a sense not genuinely different from other global cities, but also its distinguishing humanities-related aspects. For this reason, the study of the socio-cultural values of Hong Kong as a Special Administrative Region of China carries long-term significance for Hong Kong Studies as an academic discipline. Toward this end, research on the inheritance and transmission of Hong Kong culture and its values, as well as their reception and transformation in the Mainland, is pertinent to the future development of the discipline, which will also contribute a vital dimension to related fields such as China Studies and Asian Studies.

As such, Hong Kong Studies can and will continue to shed illuminating light on politically engaged analyses of the changes and social challenges that confront the world today, with far-reaching theoretical implications for related areas. Grossberg believed that culture can be an effective mediator, universal and specific at once, and the new generation of scholars must foster an "open-minded and progressive vanguard of intellectual and political movements to come".¹⁰ In the Hong Kong context, progressive vanguards cannot but take a step further to consider the (im)possibility of Hong Kong Studies in relation to the 'one world two systems' global order. It is in this sense that the future continuity of Hong Kong has to be understood.

Postscript

Since the writing of this essay in early July 2019, many unforeseen and even unimaginable events have happened in Hong Kong during the summer of protests. At certain junctures people were deeply worried that the uniqueness of the Special Administrative Region would vanish. Despite Carrie Lam's formal withdrawal of the extradition bill on 4 September 2019, there is still no obvious end in sight. Given the highly

volatile situation, the difficulty faced by critics is that their works will almost always be outdated before publication. Without a crystal ball, it is not possible to speculate how the worst chaos in Hong Kong's history will end, and it is beyond the scope of this short essay to examine the civil unrest in detail. That said, I decided to keep the original version and just added this postscript, which is not intended to be a review of developments that have occurred since the essay was written, but rather a footnote to underscore the importance of Hong Kong as well as its vulnerable situation in the new global order.

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Notes

- 1 Chen, A.H.Y. 2019. 'How the proposed law on Hong Kong-Mainland China rendition was aborted,' *Verfassungsblog*, 19 June 2019; <https://tinyurl.com/apschen>; accessed 8 July 2019.
- 2 'Xi draws "red line" for handling mainland-HK relations', *Xinhua News*, 1 July 2017; <https://tinyurl.com/xiredline>; accessed 8 July 2019.
- 3 Chu, Y-W. 2013. *Lost in Transition: Hong Kong Culture in the Age of China*. Albany: SUNY Press, p.5.
- 4 Cited from the Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Bureau's *Greater Bay Area* website; <https://tinyurl.com/gbaoverview>; accessed 8 July 2019. To be fair, the CMAB does have something to say about culture, but the section in the website's 'Policy Areas' called 'Arts & Culture, Creative Industries and Intellectual Property' focuses mainly on industries, not culture per se.
- 5 Garvey, B. 2019. 'Hong Kong Studies thrives and withers in unexpected places,' *The Newsletter No.82 Spring 2019*, International Institute for Asian Studies, p.11.
- 6 First Annual Meeting of the Society for Hong Kong Studies (official affiliate of the Association for Asian Studies), Hong Kong, 22 June 2019.
- 7 Chu, Y-W. 2018. *Found in Transition: Hong Kong Studies in the Age of China*. Albany: SUNY Press, p.24.
- 8 Grossberg, L. 2010. *Cultural Studies in the Future Tense*. Duke University Press, p.2.
- 9 Dirlik, A. 'The Rise of China and the End of the World as We Know It', Vancouver Institute Lectures, University of British Columbia, 27 February 2016; <https://tinyurl.com/dirliklecture>; a shorter version was published in *American Quarterly* 69(3):533-540 (September 2017).
- 10 Ibid. Grossberg, p.181.