

Is There Any Hope for Hong Kong?

Reflections on the History of Protests in Hong Kong through the Movie *Blue Island*

Lokman Tsui



If there is any hope for Hong Kong, as a place where we can be free to be ourselves, where we can decide our own future, it is in knowing that Hong Kong people have been protesting against repression, generation after generation.

On a rainy, windy and cold Sunday afternoon, I went to watch a screening of *Blue Island*, a movie about Hong Kong protests.¹ A friend of mine said he was afraid he would be “depressed for weeks” if he would watch it with me, so he would not go, to protect himself. If I am honest, I shared the same concern about watching a film that so clearly advertises itself as a depressing movie (the literal translation of the Chinese title 憂鬱之島 is ‘melancholic island’). But I also felt a sense of duty to watch *Blue Island*, a duty to bear witness, a duty to watch a movie about Hong Kong that is illegal for people in Hong Kong to watch under the current national security law.

After the screening, the director of *Blue Island* asked the audience a pointed question: “Are you more or less hopeful after watching the movie?” My first reaction was to let out a deep sigh because it was such a heavy question. My initial response was that after watching the movie, I felt less hopeful, not more. I felt that the movie showed a history of Hong Kong that seems to keep repeating itself, one where Hong Kong people suffer from a kind of intergenerational trauma we continue to pass on. I considered how we have been resisting, again and again, and how today’s sorry state is where we have arrived. It is hard not to feel despair. But then I thought about his question a bit more, and I realize I do feel hopeful, about Hong Kong, maybe not in the short term, but more so in the long run.

I have been in Holland for over a year now. I am still trying to make sense of what happened to Hong Kong in the last few years. I participated in the 2014 Umbrella Movement and the 2019 protests. I lost my job as a university professor in 2020, and I left the city in late 2021. Hong Kong has been changing, for the worse, for a while now, but especially after the national security law came into effect in 2020. Some of my students are in jail for participating in a protest. A former colleague has been arrested for writing ‘seditious’ articles.² And independent news

organizations, civil right groups, unions, and political parties have been shut down or left town.³ Perhaps that is one reason why I wanted to watch this movie about the Hong Kong protests: to see how others make sense of what happened.

On *Blue Island*, protest, and identity

Blue Island narrates a story about Hong Kong through a retelling of its tortured past with political protests, not only covering the protests of 2019, but also the 1967 protests during the Cultural Revolution and the 1989 protests in response to the Tiananmen Square massacre. It is neither a traditional movie nor a documentary, but instead a hybrid of the two. By putting protests of three different generations side-by-side, the director invites a direct comparison. At first sight, what stands out is how different these events are. In one particularly memorable scene, an actor is asked to reenact a scene from 1967. He is in prison and facing a British officer, who is berating him for his role in the violent protests. The prisoner defends himself, passionately, by saying he is Chinese, questioning the officer in return, asking him what is wrong with loving and defending his country. This scene is then followed by another one with the same actor, who is now being asked to reenact a scene from 2019. Again, he is in prison and being berated for his role in the violent protests, but now the officer is Chinese. This time, the prisoner defends himself, passionately, by saying he is a Hong Konger. It is perhaps easy to point out the contradiction or even the hypocrisy between these two scenes – in one moment saying you are Chinese (not British), and

in the next moment saying you are Hong Konger (not Chinese). Who are “we,” really? But what struck me was how, in both cases, the authorities are trying to force an identity on their subjects, the people in Hong Kong. Together, they show how little freedom Hong Kong people have had, throughout history, to decide for ourselves who we are and who we want to be. This is an important reason why we protested. This is the freedom we fought so hard for, the freedom to be ourselves.

In the winter of 2022, I was messaging with a friend from Hong Kong. She told me she had changed jobs, to a pro-Beijing company. My friend is staunchly pro-democratic, but in today’s Hong Kong, there are almost no pro-democratic companies or institutions left to work for. She was telling me how, even in this pro-Beijing company, people seem deflated, demotivated, just going through the motions. I was surprised and asked why. She said it was because they too know that in today’s Hong Kong, there is little agency or freedom, that the authorities are the ones who decide. I nodded. In today’s Hong Kong, even the pro-Beijing side seems to have little hope.

A Hong Kong that decides its own future

So let’s talk about hope. In his book *On the Other Side of Freedom: The Case for Hope*, DeRay Mckesson helps us understand the difference between having faith and having hope.⁴ He understands faith as the belief that a particular outcome will happen. In contrast, he says that hope is the belief that a particular outcome can happen. To have hope for Hong Kong, in other words, does not mean that I believe a free, fair, and open Hong Kong is destined or guaranteed to happen in the future. To have hope instead means that

I believe Hong Kong someday can be free from political repression, to be able to make its own mistakes, and to decide its own future. To have hope is subversive, because the Chinese Communist Party wants you to believe that the story of Hong Kong is already written, that its future is set in stone, that whatever you do will not make a difference. But the reality is that we will not know until we try. In one memorable scene in *Blue Island*, the director puts two protesters in conversation with each other in a prison cell, one from the 1967 generation and the other from the 2019 generation. In today’s Hong Kong, they are on opposite ends of the political spectrum. But what the movie also reveals is that they have something in common: in their own way, each generation, again and again, has been fighting oppression in Hong Kong.

It is easy to remember the failures, but less so the victories. So let us remember that in 2003, we successfully protested against Article 23, an attempt to enact a national security law in Hong Kong. And let us remember that in 2012, we successfully protested again against the moral and national education reform, which aimed to include textbooks in our schools that would want us to gloss over the Cultural Revolution (1967) and the Tiananmen Square massacre (1989). Let us also remember that in November 2022, people in China successfully protested against the government’s incredibly stringent COVID-19 regulations.

Sometimes, hope springs from strange places. It was painful for me when I learned that one of my students was sentenced to jail for participating in a protest. I felt not only a sense of responsibility, but also a kind of survivor’s guilt. I felt that we failed her. A bright, smart, young student now has to serve time in prison. I promised myself I would write to her, that I would be there for her, that this was the least I could do. But what surprised me, through our correspondence, is how hopeful my student is and how contagious such hope can be. I realize she is surprisingly strong and resilient, and yes, hopeful. She tells me she is working hard. She is trying to learn French, she likes reading *Game of Thrones*, and she reminds me to do the things she cannot do. To live life fully. To take care of ourselves and the people we love.

The protests might seem gone now. It might seem we have given up, with many of us having left Hong Kong. But if we zoom out, over the long run, the arc of Hong Kong’s history shows that we will keep trying, that we will not give up. Altering Martin Luther King’s famous statement, Mckesson reminds us that “the arc of the moral universe is long, and it will bend toward justice if we bend it.”⁵ If we bend it. In Hong Kong’s case, there is no if, if, if. Bending it is what the people in Hong Kong have been doing, generation after generation. Knowing this does give me some consolation and solace, and indeed, hope.

Lokman Tsui writes about freedom of speech, digital rights, and Hong Kong. He is a Fellow with the Citizen Lab at the University of Toronto. He is based in Amsterdam and currently writing a book, a personal history of authoritarianism. Email: lokmant sui@protonmail.com

Fig. 1 (right): Hong Kong people lighting candles on June 4, 2020 (Photo by the author, 2020).

Fig. 2 (below): Police guarding an empty Victoria Park on June 4, 2021 (Photo by the author, 2021).

Fig. 3 (top): Protesters against the anti-extradition bill, June 9, 2019 (Photo by the author, 2019).



Notes

- 1 *Blue Island*, directed by Chan Tze-woon (Blue Island Production Company Limited, 2022)
- 2 Agence France-Presse. (2022, April 11). Prominent Hong Kong journalist Allan Au reportedly held on sedition charge. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/11/prominent-hong-kong-journalist-allan-au-reportedly-held-on-sedition-charge>
- 3 Hong Kong Free Press. (2022, June 30). Timeline: 58 Hong Kong civil society groups disband following the onset of the security law. *Hong Kong Free Press*. <https://hongkongfpp.com/2022/06/30/explainer-over-50-groups-gone-in-11-months-how-hong-kongs-pro-democracy-forces-crumbled>
- 4 Mckesson, D. (2018). *On the Other Side of Freedom: The Case for Hope*. Penguin.
- 5 Mckesson, *On the Other Side of Freedom*, 6.