



Beijing reaps bitter fruit in Hong Kong

By Peter Lee

It's becoming easier to understand why the People's Republic of China landed on Ilham Tohti, the Uyghur "public intellectual", like a ton of bricks.

Judging from the admittedly selective excerpts used at the kangaroo court to damn him to "indefinite detention", reported perhaps not inaccurately in the West as a "life sentence", Ilham had hoped to use his bully pulpit at a Xinjiang university to nurture a cadre of students with a strong sense of Uyghur identity, alienated from the PRC regime and convinced of the right and need to agitate for greater Xinjiang autonomy in the face of an alien occupying power.



Then, perhaps, Xinjiang politics would have evolved into the politics of perpetual, continually aggravated, and burgeoning grievance and ever-more-entrenched spirit of resistance that one sees in Palestine - or on the streets of Hong Kong today.

The Hong Kong police showed a poor understanding of the street theater of populist politics in response to the provocations of the student vanguard of the Occupy movement, trotting out the tear gas and rubber bullets in a misguided effort to clear roads in the Admiralty district, and they have lost the public relations battle for now, and perhaps forever.

In retrospect, perhaps the strategists in Hong Kong and Beijing might have concluded it would be better for the police to stand by and allow the students to storm their way into various government offices – over the weekend, for goodness sakes! – and let public opinion chew for a few days over the issue of whether it welcomed this kind of confrontational politics. After all, that's how the much-maligned KMT government in Taiwan handled the Sunflower occupation of the Legislative Yuan a few weeks back; as a result, the PR gains of the students appear to have been relatively transitory, and the uneasy balance between "let's give the PRC the middle finger" and "don't rock the boat" factions seems to have been preserved.

Based on dismal results in places like Egypt, Pakistan, and Ukraine, I am not a big fan of the "student activists raise a ruckus in the main square" brand of democracy. If Hong Kong democracy activists had wanted to give voice to the popular mood, instead of driving the opinion process through confrontational street action, they could have organized boycotts of the 2017 polls (which, if the relevant bill passes the local legislature, will involve universal

popular suffrage to vote for candidates screened by a committee of presumably PRC-inclined worthies).

However, the alienation of many Hong Kong people, particularly those on the younger side of an increasingly stark generational divide, toward the PRC and the disruptions that PRC citizens have brought to the economic and social life of the city, is profound; and the PRC's disturbing (and perhaps violent) efforts to put a tighter leash on local media indicate that Beijing is attempting to manage and restrain political expression in Hong Kong.

An unofficial civic referendum (actually offering democracy supporters a choice between three different pro-democracy options) attracted almost 800,000 voters, equivalent to about one-fifth of the city's electorate.

So there was a big fat fuse just lying there, and Occupy Hong Kong decided to light it, starting with a class boycott and demonstrations organized by the Hong Kong Federation of Students. And, since I'm never afraid to mix a metaphor, the Hong Kong government poured fuel on the fire by pepper-spraying and tear-gassing it.

Over at Reuters, John Pomfret provided some context for the police response:

Hundreds of pro-democracy activists stormed government headquarters [sic] late on Friday after student leaders demanding greater democracy urged them to charge into the compound.

Police used pepper spray as the protesters smashed barriers and climbed over fences in chaotic scenes in the heart of the Asian financial centre, following Beijing's decision to rule out free elections for the city's leader in 2017.

One student leader, Joshua Wong, a thin 17-year-old with dark-rimmed glasses and bowl-cut hair, was dragged away by police kicking and screaming as protesters chanted and struggled to free him.¹

Wonder how much of that context will be remembered by the media, much of which has put on its Tiananmen! Today! goggles as well as teargas goggles to report the unrest.

The Tiananmen analogies are, in my opinion, a barrier to understanding what's going on.

Tiananmen 1989 was a remonstrance/petitioning movement that eschewed disobedience beyond passive resistance and had no political endgame beyond hopes that the regime would respond to its moral suasion by implementing democratic reforms. If there were political calculations to utilize the demonstrations to advance a concrete agenda, they came from reformers inside the elite.

Occupy Hong Kong is a carefully planned program of civil disobedience, escalation, and provocation meant to provoke a political crisis that will polarize Hong Kong opinion on behalf of the democracy movement and force the elite to support the demands of the movement in order to maintain their local positions of power and prosperity.

And, to make an observation that will probably not endear me to the democracy movement, the 1989 student movement was a popular response to a marked crisis of governance, economic management, and corruption by the PRC regime. On the other hand, it appears to me that the Occupy Hong Kong movement was sparked by the announcement of a proposed reform for the 2017 election – universal suffrage – and the calculation by democracy activists that the experience of actually voting for some candidate, albeit Beijing vetted, might fatally beguile Hong Kongers with the PRC's implementation of managed democracy and make agitation for full democracy more difficult.

It should also be said that Dr Benny Tai, one of the organizers of the Hong Kong movement, is no *Wuerkaixi*, the grandiose, self-aggrandizing, and ultimately feckless face of the 1989 movement. He is a law professor at University of Hong Kong, smart and savvy, and I think he has envisioned plausible endgames that don't involve Beijing sending in the army to crush local unrest à la Tiananmen and martyr his student activists – though I'm sure this is one of the critical scenarios he has to game.

For me, a key "tell" as to the fortunes and strategy of the democracy movement as the political crisis evolves will be whether and how it focuses its ire on the business elite that provides the local support and financial muscle for Beijing's control of the territory.

Will some tycoons be tagged as collaborators and find their local reputation and interests threatened? While others are quietly approached to suggest the advisability of hedging their bets between Hong Kong and Beijing? Time, as they say, will tell.

I imagine that the first reaction of President Xi Jinping and the CCP will be frustration with their local cats'-paws in Hong Kong for failing to keep a lid on the situation and, when things got out of hand, inflaming it. So I guess the Hong Kong portfolio will be handed to some clandestine crisis-management team.

¹ [Hong Kong students storm government HQ to demand full democracy](#), Reuters, September 26, 2014.

As to the options available to Beijing, one is, of course, send in the tanks! – and endure international obloquy and the undying hatred of the citizens of Hong Kong.

Another, which attracts less interest among the Tiananmen-fixated, is to let Hong Kong stew in its own juice, allow the dysfunction to burgeon until a local backlash is triggered or, failing that, at least stew until the local worthies have had enough and publicly petition Beijing to help them out of the mess, perhaps through an ultimatum coupled with some post-2017 legal legerdemain relating to the electoral commission.

Western reporting seems to be all over the map, albeit with a heavy Tiananmen Redux overlay in many occasions.

There is a significant population of journos that Beijing has expelled or otherwise mistreated; some of them are in Hong Kong or itching to get there, and I suspect many of them, while maintaining the strictest standards of reportorial objectivity, will not be unhappy for this opportunity to put the boot in on the regime.

One of the most irritating canards that is presumably an Occupy Hong Kong meme that some journalists have picked up is "Xi Should Be More Like Deng" – ie adopt Deng's flexible, pragmatic ways in dealing with the Hong Kong situation.

As a reminder, Deng was not afraid to play the Hong Kong invasion card in his discussions with Margaret Thatcher: *The Chinese were ready to resort to "requisition by force" if the negotiations had set off unrest in the colony, said Lu Ping, who later headed negotiations with Chris Patten, the last governor. [Then prime minister and later] Baroness Thatcher said later that Deng Xiaoping, then China's leader, told her directly: "I could walk in and take the whole lot this afternoon."*²

Deng was also the architect of Hong Kong's managed democracy structure. And, of course, Deng green-lighted the entry of the armed forces into Beijing on June 3-4, 1989.

With Tiananmen on the lips of so many commentators, the assertion that Xi Jinping should take his grievance-management cues from Deng Xiaoping is borderline ludicrous.

Selective memory has also found its way into reporting (or at least headline-writing) Occupy's claims that the current democracy movement was triggered by Beijing "renegeing" on its promise of democracy for Hong Kong by scheduling universal suffrage for 2017, but insisting that only candidates vetted by the commission could run for office.

As far as I understand it, the commission set-up was integral to Beijing's foundational plan for Hong Kong. In other words, the PRC would commit to 50 years of free rein for business/society only if the direct democracy genie could be kept in the bottle by controlling the list of candidates eligible for office.

I also suspect that the PRC told the Thatcher government that, if the UK tried to belatedly introduce full direct democracy in Hong Kong prior to 1997 (as Chris Patten championed) and burden the PRC with the unpleasant task of rolling back a democratic status quo when it claimed sovereignty over the territory, that would be a trigger for the real Occupy Hong Kong – by China.

As noted above, Deng Xiaoping was the conceptual architect of the strategy to install a "kill switch" on Hong Kong democracy and balance Hong Kong's economic and social freedoms under the "one country two systems" formula with political control by keeping hostile administrators out of the Hong Kong political mix.

Here's what Deng Xiaoping said about the Hong Kong rule in 1984:

*Some requirements or qualifications should be established with regard to the administration of Hong Kong affairs by the people of Hong Kong. It must be required that patriots form the main body of administrators, that is, of the future government of the Hong Kong special region. Of course it should include other Chinese, too, as well as foreigners invited to serve as advisers. What is a patriot? A patriot is one who respects the Chinese nation, sincerely supports the motherland's resumption of sovereignty over Hong Kong and wishes not to impair Hong Kong's prosperity and stability. Those who meet these requirements are patriots, whether they believe in capitalism or feudalism or even slavery. We don't demand that they be in favour of China's socialist system; we only ask them to love the motherland and Hong Kong.*³

And here's how that intention was implemented in Article 45 of the Hong Kong Basic Law, which became the effective constitution of Hong Kong upon reversion in 1997:

² [China plotted Hong Kong invasion](#), The Australian, June 25, 2007.

³ [One Country, Two Systems](#), peopledaily.com, June 23-24, 1984.

*The Chief Executive of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region shall be selected by election or through consultations held locally and be appointed by the Central People's Government.
The method for selecting the Chief Executive shall be specified in the light of the actual situation in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region and in accordance with the principle of gradual and orderly progress.
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.⁴*

Clearly, the PRC's envisioned terminus (the "ultimate aim") of the democratic reform line is universal suffrage to vote for candidates put forth by a nominating committee, not universal suffrage in the nomination as well as election process, which is the Occupy Hong Kong movement's demand.

If the PRC government revised, promised to revise, or hinted it would revise this understanding to do away with its most important tool for controlling electoral politics in Hong Kong, the nominating committee, please let me know. Until then, I will regard the "China reneged/broke its democracy promise" line as a canard peddled to provide unnatural enhancement to the legitimacy of the Occupy movement.

"We don't like the Basic Law and want to overturn it after 17 years through street action" is, I suppose, a tougher sell than "China broke its promise" but, in my opinion, it's more honest.

But I have a feeling that legalistic quibbling has been overtaken by the outrage that "the Hong Kong government gassed its own people", which, perhaps, is the place that the democracy movement hoped the debate would end up in the first place.

Peter Lee writes on East and South Asian affairs and their intersection with US foreign policy.

⁴ See [here](#).