

2024. 9. 28 (15 mins presentation in Opening of Harcourt Road Exhibition)

Hui Lai Ming

Participation: Social Responsibility

Reflecting on the process of participating in social movements, our generation has been deeply influenced by the 1989 Beijing Tiananmen Democracy Movement when I was in high school. Until 2014, I felt a responsibility to fight for democracy in Hong Kong, inspired by past experiences. The belief that I could share my experiences, especially on the front lines of protest.

At that time, I had to be very careful to hide my identity, not letting my parents know. I would disguise myself, wearing clothes I rarely wore, making it harder to be recognized even if caught on the news. Fear of worrying my parents, who had come to Hong Kong from the mainland after 1949 (the founding of the People's Republic of China) to seek a stable life and understood the dangers of the regime.

The first time I seriously considered the possibility of being arrested was on the eve of July 1, 1997. At that time, I even practiced how to handle my skin condition if it flared up. The protest was against the immediate imposition of temporary legislation by the Chinese Communist Party to suppress the Legislative Council, which had existing directly elected seats (31 out of 60 seats were held by democrats, ending on June 28, 1997).

Together with companions of Hong Kong Federation of Students, we had planned to enter the venue of the Legislative Council meeting (Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre) before it was blocked off. We would spend some money to have breakfast early in a café, then stay and wait. As the student representatives walked out to protest inside the meeting room, I was in the lobby, distributing leaflets within the blockade. In the end, I was not arrested, only escorted out beyond the cordon.

After 1989, apart from the June Fourth Tiananmen Square gathering, the 2003 protest against Article 23 legislation, and the 2005 march with 250,000 people demanding universal suffrage in 2007, Hong Kong's social movements can be considered "elite activism." Even in the 2008 protest against the construction of high-speed rail where villagers participated, the resistance was still limited to specific groups and could not be described as a phenomenon of civic participation. I had been involved without any affiliation to a group or party until October 6, 2013, when I attended a training to become a volunteer facilitator for the "Occupy Central with Love and Peace" movement, which was a breakthrough.

I remember a post-discussion meeting where we shared why we became volunteers as facilitators. I looked at Benny Tai, who was sitting directly in front of me, and thought: because I wanted to personally understand whether a social movement initiated by two university professors and a pastor was also an elite activism. Later, I found the answer - the purpose of the discussions was to have "no main stage." From October 2013 to February 2014, we held at least 40 deliberation sessions in three stages, where participants could freely express their opinions. In fact, some participants requested changes to the discussion topics during the sessions, and the topics were altered based on group votes.

Commitment: Confidence and Tacit Understanding

The protests on Harcourt Road emerged as a result of government headquarters relocation and

regime changes. Before 1997, the actions I participated in mainly demanded the release of Chinese human rights activists unjustly imprisoned, such as calling for the release of Wei Jingsheng. We would go to the Xinhua News Agency on Queen's Road East in Wan Chai, which, despite being a news media organisation on the surface, was actually a representative of the Chinese Communist Party in Hong Kong. When protesting against the Hong Kong government, we would go to the Central Government Offices on Lower Albert Road in Central, as seen in the 2005 fight for universal suffrage. The protests on Harcourt Road were triggered by the government's headquarters move to Admiralty in 2011, making Harcourt Road the closest major road to the bustling city.

It should be noted that the "Occupy Central with Love and Peace" and the Umbrella Movement were two distinct movements. For me, they were inseparable, and the names did not affect my participation because it was a spontaneous protest. "Occupy Central with Love and Peace" spent nearly a year explaining the meaning of civil disobedience through peaceful, rational, non-violent, and non-vulgar means, highlighting the sacrifice to expose the irrationality and absurdity of the regime. It also advocated for self-determination. Although there were only around 3,000 people participating in the discussion days, the civil referendum held on June 22 selected a universal suffrage proposal submitted by civil society, with a total of 792,808 voters and a final vote of 42.1%, endorsing the "Three Track" proposal recommended by the True Universal Suffrage Alliance. The deliberation days allowed many with shared beliefs but previously unacquainted individuals to meet and engage in political discussion. Some have stayed in touch since the end of the deliberation days, up to today. I believe this period was crucial in building the foundation for a civic network because seeing real partners gave everyone the confidence to participate in the occupation.

Because of my past experiences, I have gained the confidence to make many decisions at the protest scene that encourage everyone to act together.

On the evening of September 27th, my friends and I observed the area and invited everyone to help set up barricades to prevent police raids, with a crucial location being access to toilets. In previous protests, the lack of toilet led some to reluctantly leave the protest area, causing a decrease in numbers. A young stranger agreed with me and was setting up barricades to include the public toilets near Civic Square within the occupied area. At that moment, it felt like everyone present had established a magical understanding.

This tacit understanding became a crucial element in the occupation.

By noon on September 28th, the police had blocked the path to government headquarters, preventing people from joining those who were already there. At that time, my artist friend decided to create an art piece on the footbridge at Harcourt Road. Of course, the police viewed him as an emotionally unstable protester who might jump off the bridge (later, it was revealed that negotiation experts convinced the authorities that he was mentally ill and he had resigned by the time of his prosecution). Even then, one could reasonably assume that the police would arrange air cushions to prevent him from harming himself. As a result, while the police cleared the way for ambulances and fire trucks to enter, the crowd also flooded onto Harcourt Road. Before creating his artwork, this friend notified a few others by phone, and the tacit understanding came into play.

With the blockade breached, Admiralty and Central were filled with people. However, the government chose to continue using the police to suppress the situation, without considering dialogue with the people of Hong Kong.

At 5:58 pm on September 28th, the first tear gas canister was fired on Harcourt Road! Everyone was shocked at that moment, but they refused to disperse. Later, my friends and I said that when the first tear gas canister was fired, people would shout in surprise, and by the time the second one was fired, it turned into a gasp, and by the third, it was more like a resigned "um....tear gas ah..." A total of 87 canisters were fired on September 28th and 29th around Admiralty and Central, yet this only motivated more Hongkongers to come out, even facing the police line, chanting "Hongkongers, Hongkongers..." as a slogan in response to police violence, the identity of Hongkongers has been clearly established. This tacit understanding gave us the confidence to fight for our democracy.

For me personally, this tacit understanding was the most crucial. At that time, I had lost track of the friend who was taken away by the police from the footbridge of Harcourt Road, not knowing anything about his safety. Amidst the tear gas, it was hard to tell how many tears shed were due to sadness, but I was certain that he wouldn't back down. Therefore, I understood that by doing what I could on the scene, we would surely reunite. Confidence was essential.

After the first and second rounds of tear gas attacks, everyone was a bit disoriented but did not retreat. That night, seeing the situation, I was worried that more tear gas would be fired, so on D'Aguilar Street across from the McDonald's at Admiralty Centre, I shouted out a method to alleviate the effects of tear gas: using towels soaked in vinegar to cover mouth and nose. This was an effective method used by friends during the 2005 anti-WTO protests. Someone asked me to repeat it for recording and spreading. And then I shouted, "I'm going to buy vinegar now, need three more friends to help." As soon as I said that, someone came up to me. I went to two supermarkets, the first had too little vinegar, then we went to another one in Pacific Place basement. The store clerk said they were closing, but I rushed in and explained the situation to them. They then helped me gather all the vinegar in the store and even gave me plastic bags for free. As I left the supermarket, three friends I had just met were waiting at the entrance. This was tacit understanding!

Citizen Awakening

On the evening of September 28th, the media captured riot police raising orange flags warning protesters to leave or face gunfire. By 10:20 pm, the Hong Kong Federation of Students received reports of the police using rubber bullets to disperse protesters, urging them to withdraw completely, stating we must preserve our strength and gather again another day. They emphasized that it was the personal decision of each protester to stay or leave, and those willing to stay despite the risks would be supported by the union until the last moment. Subsequently, "Occupy Central with Love and Peace" also called for a full withdrawal of protesters, but indicated that the Admiralty site would continue to operate until the end. However, protesters did not retreat; each time the tear gas dissipated, they reoccupied the main roads, and the situation continued throughout the night. Simultaneously, spurred by online calls, the occupation spread to MongKok and Causeway Bay.

To have control over our destiny, we must first understand our rights and obligations. This movement is a fight against an unjust system. Hongkongers believed in the system, in the Basic Law as Hong Kong's constitution, to establish universal suffrage. However, when the Chinese government introduced the August 31st decision, depriving us of our right to nominate, requiring candidates to be nominated by half of the 1,200-member nominating committee, it was not a "genuine" universal suffrage. With promises broken, Hongkongers took to the streets, using their bodies to resist, using umbrellas and cling film to counter the police's weapons, exposing the injustice of the regime.

Believing in the system, Hongkongers were orderly in the occupied areas, leading CNN reporter Railey to comment, "a bit too freak nice." This must be a beautiful scene that emerges from a grassroots movement.

Inheritance

The Umbrella Movement in 2014 may not have achieved genuine universal suffrage, but it sowed the seeds for numerous post-Umbrella organisations to emerge. These organisations were crucial support for the 2019 anti-extradition movement, such as the legal support for those arrested, civil human rights groups, and the Médecins Inspirés of medical volunteers. One notable figure is the Chalk Girl. In December 2014, at age 14, she drew flowers on the Lennon Wall in the cleared Admiralty occupied site and was arrested by 14 officers for "suspected involvement in criminal damage." She was later sentenced to three weeks in a juvenile detention center. In June 2019, during I stayed behind in the Legislative Council protest area, I was with her. She was already a university student and a fitness coach.

After the Umbrella Movement, many felt powerless, but they continued to hold onto their beliefs, study hard, and engage in civil society activities. This spirit gave Hongkongers the confidence to participate in the 2019 anti-extradition movement, maintaining unity and solidarity. Today, as we are scattered abroad and Hong Kong's civil society has been dismantled, it is disheartening. However, we must maintain our faith, continuing the spirit of Hongkongers' fight for democracy. Same as post-Umbrella Movement, we have not given up and have established Hong Kong citizen organisations in different corners of the world. In March 2023, we organised a three-day conference in London, with 62 civil organisations formed by Hongkongers in exile, contemplating the way forward. Similarly, in April of this year, there was another three-day conference.

Let us all remember together, defy orders, do not accept fate, fight for democracy, overthrow tyranny. We will be back!