

REVIEWS

Ming-sho Ho, *Be Water: Collective Improvisation in Hong Kong's Anti-Extradition Protests*

Temple University Press: Philadelphia 2025, £88, hardback
258 pp, 9781 4399 2484 6

Ching Kwan Lee, *Forever Hong Kong: A Global City's Decolonization Struggle*

Harvard University Press: Cambridge MA 2025, £37.95, hardback
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Edmund Cheng and Samson Yuen, *The Making of Leaderful Mobilization: Power and Contention in Hong Kong*

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THREE VISTAS OF HONG KONG

In 2019, Hong Kong witnessed a social movement that was unprecedented for the territory, both in terms of its scale and geographical spread. Over roughly six months, from June through December, mass protests took place across the region's eighteen districts. Initially provoked by the Hong Kong government's proposed extradition bill, which would have allowed the transfer of suspects to mainland China, the demonstrations swelled into a civic uprising that called for democratizing measures. In a May 2020 survey conducted by the Chinese University of Hong Kong, over 45 per cent of the residents polled said they had taken part in at least one protest, which would suggest that more than 3 million of the region's 7 million inhabitants were involved. Despite the massive numbers, fatal casualties were few: one person died of injuries inflicted by protesters; the death of one activist has been attributed to police pursuit and a small number of others to suicide.

The 2019 movement succeeded in halting the extradition bill. But it also triggered a fierce political backlash that has completely transformed the mode of governance in the territory. The authorities in Hong Kong and Beijing launched an array of lawsuits against the protesters, using existing legislation—with charges of rioting, unauthorized assembly and sedition—as well as the new National Security Law adopted by the PRC's National People's Congress in May 2020, backed up by a local National Security Ordinance enacted in 2024. A spate of prosecutions under these latest laws targeted the political opposition, the media and civic organizations, accused of representing a danger to national security. According to a 2024 report published by the Hong Kong Free Press, 10,279 people have been arrested, including 1,754 under the age of eighteen, and 2,961 have been prosecuted; over 7,000 cases remain in judicial limbo after a mooted statute of limitations was dismissed by the head of the Security Bureau in 2023.

Emblematic lawsuits were brought against the 'Hong Kong 47', activists who ran unauthorized primary elections for the pan-democratic camp in 2020, as well as the editors of the *Stand News* website, the media magnate Jimmy Lai and his tabloid, *Apple Daily*, and the organizers of the annual Tiananmen vigils. In the meantime, a large number of civil-society associations have chosen to disband voluntarily, many saying they have experienced 'pressure'. Some of Hong Kong's key institutions—including the Legislative Council and trial-by-jury system—have been restructured. Though figures are hard to come by, the economist Sung Yun-wing estimates that between 2021 and 2024 around 300,000 Hong Kong residents resettled overseas. As a point of comparison, the 1967 Hong Kong protests against British rule lasted roughly as long, from May to December, with higher casualty figures, including 51 deaths. But they mobilized fewer protesters, spread less widely and entailed only half as many arrests. In May 1973, the colonial government agreed to release the remaining prisoners as part of the establishment of full diplomatic relations between the UK and the PRC.

Three recent studies by scholars based, respectively, in Taiwan, the United States and Hong Kong, shed new light on these events. *Be Water*, named after the movement's signature slogan, by the Taiwanese political sociologist Ming-sho Ho, presents an extended timeline for the protests—from February 2019 to June 2020—but set within a relatively short contextual period, beginning in 2015. Ho's detailed investigation is built on a unique data-set of protest events drawn from public sources, as well as many in-depth interviews. Among the 1,770 protests that he catalogues, he concludes that 63 per cent had no official sponsor or organizer. Eighteen brought together more than 100,000 participants. Ho draws a distinction between peaceful, disruptive and violent events, which respectively account for 65 per cent, 28 per cent and 6 per cent of the protests he records. Peaceful

events are shown to have dominated initially, whereas disruptive and then violent events emerged later. The distinction is productive, though Ho's application of it is contestable: it is a little surprising, for example, that in Ho's table of events neither the 12 June 2019 siege of the Legislative Council, which delayed the second reading of the bill, nor the 1 July occupation (and vandalism) of the LegCo complex, is classified as violent.

Ho's previous study, *Challenging Beijing's Mandate of Heaven* (2019), a comparison of the Sunflower movement in Taiwan and the Umbrella movement in Hong Kong in 2014, was informed by political-opportunity theory, a sociological framework that foregrounds the institutional context in which movements operate. *Be Water*, by contrast, emphasizes threats rather than opportunities, and the role of human agency over structures. Ho's characterization of the movement is ultimately neither organization-centred (Charles Tilly), nor reliant on theories of spontaneous leaderless activism, which in other hands tend to lean heavily on technology (Clay Shirky) or on romantic populism (David Graeber). Instead, drawing on Alain Touraine's 'actionalist' sociology and James Jasper's conception of 'artful creativity', he describes the movement's decision-making in terms of collective improvisation, defined as a set of 'peer-produced strategic responses without prior planning'. Ho sees this as reflected in the 'Be water' slogan and explains how it relied upon a strong sense of solidarity, captured by other rallying cries such as 'Brothers climb the mountain together' and 'Don't snitch and don't split'. A shared repertoire of feelings, experiences and impulses—outrage, defiance, suffering and altruism—helped to define this new collectivity of 'comrades' (*saujuk*, literally 'hands and feet'), producing what he calls a 'performance of community'.

In Ho's account, the escalation of the movement was primarily rhetorical. The slogan 'Liberate Hong Kong, revolution of our times' was adopted because it was defiant rather than because the movement advocated independence; violent protests remained marginal and concrete claims did not exceed the original five demands—that is: withdrawal of the extradition bill; removal of the designation 'riot' for the protests; the release and dropping of charges against arrested protesters; an independent inquiry into police brutality; and advancing universal suffrage. After initial momentum stalled, Ho demonstrates how the movement was sustained by a series of tactical innovations, including economic mobilization (boycotts and buycotts to promote the 'yellow economy') and fostering international solidarity, though it was also reliant on 'micro-foundations of support' embedded in both online and offline networks.

In the final analysis, Ho reflects that collective improvisation is neither immune to 'bad ideas' nor infinitely resourceful and is thereby rarely able to overcome a unified state response. Nevertheless, he insists that Hongkongers

'reinvented' protest in 2019 by basing their activism on a sense of moral outrage. This led to what he calls a 'quest for authenticity' in protests, also to be found in other recent movements in Thailand, Myanmar and Iran, as well as the US (Black Lives Matter) and China (White Paper). There is certainly some evidence for his claim that the 'post-materialist' dimension of the movement has had a lasting impact. Despite an apparent return to more materialist values in Hong Kong following the 2020 national-security backlash, qualitative research by Francis Lee shows that this may be limited to societal goals, while personal aspirations for self-fulfilment remain strong.

Ching Kwan Lee, a Hong Kong-born sociologist based at UCLA, is best known for her ethnographic studies of the mainland Chinese working class, including the landmark *Against the Law* (2007). In *Forever Hong Kong*, she takes issue with previous work in social-movement studies for inheriting a theoretical blindspot with regard to the 'subjects of collective action and their political orientation'. Lee was a participant observer in the street rallies between June 2019 and May 2020 and draws on many in-depth interviews with activists. Her account sees the movement through the broader lens of decolonization, presenting it as the culmination of a longer struggle for self-determination in Hong Kong. Building on Law Wing Sang's account, in *Collaborative Colonial Power* (2009), of how Sino-British collaboration produced and reproduced colonial rule in Hong Kong, Lee describes how the structures of this 'double coloniality' endured after the seamless takeover by the new sovereign in 1997. Her book makes an original and persuasive case that the 2019 protests effectively punctured the four 'foundational myths' of this double colonialism, which she defines as: the unconditional desirability of stability and prosperity; the neutrality of the rule of law; the promise of a free-market utopia; and the idea that China is Hong Kong's destiny.

If the colonial structure did not fundamentally change after 1997, why did Hongkongers suddenly no longer accept the 'rule by consent' that they had tolerated before? Lee offers a set of structural factors as explanation. The social consensus of the 1997–2017 'interregnum', when the old colonial master had exited but the new one had not yet consolidated its might, was ruptured first by capitalist instability—the Asian financial crisis, the real-estate crash, the subprime crisis—and then by increasing pressure from China to advance preparations for full integration into the PRC system by 2047 (in particular through the penetration of businesses by state capital and the clientelist recruitment of the working-class population by United Front groups). The looming deadline of 2047 created a sense of existential crisis for younger cohorts, born around 1997. These economic and generational factors were compounded by the geopolitical conjuncture, in which growing tensions between China and the US generated what Lee calls 'moral leverage' for the protesters.

Forever Hong Kong is brought to life by extensive quotes from Lee's interviews with participants. Stress falls on their motivations, rather than the mechanisms of mobilization. As her research makes clear, a multiplicity of agendas converged around what was perceived as the 'China threat': as well as the young people who feared the loss of liberties after 2047, middle-class professionals felt blocked in their careers by mainland executives, while housewives and newly arrived immigrants were inspired by and sympathized with the protesters. In Lee's analysis, too, solidarity plays an important role:

If the postcolonial generation spearheading all the protests prior to 2019 were a passionate minority, then the 2019 anti-extradition movement had achieved the historical feat of inspiring the pragmatic majority to join the resistance . . . Many protesters, especially the youngest cohorts, began as accidental participants with only vague political intentions. But through action in mass protests, they were (re)born as political subjects, and Hong Kong became a 'political community in action', a tangible and visible force with real political efficacy. As Fanon famously remarked, 'The "thing" colonized becomes a man through the very process of liberation.'

Although she duly notes that there were examples of 'coercive solidarity', the overall dynamic Lee portrays is one of empathy and connection. Violence by the state against the protesters served to reinforce the ties between activists and sympathizers. In one chapter, Lee details the various dimensions of this violence, which encompasses not only police force, but also economic suppression and institutional domination thinly disguised in legal forms. She explains how this gave rise to a dynamic both of escalation and de-escalation. After the occupation of two universities in late November 2019, for example, participants increasingly sought to move the struggle away from the streets and focus it instead on economic actions (boycott/buycott), new unions and election campaigns, building on the landslide success of opposition parties in the November district elections.

What remains less clear from Lee's account is the extent to which this solidarity was directly inspired by ideas of decolonization. The argument developed is that 'reflexivity'—which I understand in this context to mean a form of self-awareness as a community—was key to establishing a collective subjectivity that empowered the protesters to puncture the four colonial myths and persuade the 'pragmatic majority' to join them. Although this framing is compelling—and the movement was undoubtedly able to rally broad support—as Lee herself points out, motivations for joining the protests were multiple and diffuse. Solidarity with the protesters did not necessarily translate into an ideological agenda. Surveys consistently indicated low support for Hong Kong independence, even at the height of the movement. Of course, not all decolonization movements aim at nation-building, as the

Africanist Frederick Cooper has shown. Nevertheless, although the framework is alluring—and the ability of the movement to attract support is undeniable—further research would be needed to pin down the protests' specific relationship to decolonization.

The third book, *The Making of Leaderful Mobilization*, is written by two political scientists based in Hong Kong. Edmund Cheng and Samson Yuen employ their discipline's theoretical tools to drill down into the questions raised by *Be Water* and *Forever Hong Kong*. Their book is a polished conceptual construction, undergirded by a range of data drawn from on-site surveys of the movement, ethnographic observation, opinion polls and interviews, as well as social media. Like Ho, Cheng and Yuen express scepticism about political opportunity theory, arguing that it is of limited use in authoritarian contexts, where threats are more likely to explain mobilization. The extradition bill represented a convergence of structural and contingent threats: the ongoing erosion of Hong Kong's autonomy through increased intervention by the Central Government collided with the immediate danger introduced by the legislation. But as Cheng and Yuen argue, in order to trigger mobilizations, threats by the state need to be mediated, interpreted and framed. In their account, the presentation of the bill as an existential menace to Hong Kong, encapsulated in the slogan '*faan sung zung*'—'Oppose sending to China' / 'Oppose preparing for funeral'—was crucial in 'synchronizing' the claims of many disparate groups.

As in Lee's book, the movement is set in the wider landscape of Hong Kong's sociopolitical development, though in different terms. In Cheng and Yuen's account, Hong Kong functioned as a 'liberal oligarchy' both before and after 1997. With the handover, the ruling coalition—made up of the party-state, the local civil service and business elites—struck a balance between loyalties to national sovereignty, administrative efficiency and business interests. An institutionalized democratic opposition had gradually coalesced in the late-colonial era; due to generational change and economic turbulence, this layer began to articulate new claims just as Beijing was advancing its 'state- and nation-building' measures, adding clientelist recruitment of wage-earners to its repertoire of elite co-optation. Cheng and Yuen view the evolving strength and unity of the opposition as decisive in determining the forms of Hong Kong's successive mobilizations. They lay out the following cycle: a strong and united opposition produced the 'brokered mobilization' of 2003; a strong but disunited opposition gave rise to the 'factional' one of 2010; a weak and disunited opposition saw 'fragmented' mobilization in 2014; and finally, a strong but disunited opposition produced the 'leaderful' movement of 2019.

The concept of 'leaderful mobilization' is crucial to their characterization of the anti-extradition movement, distinguishing it from earlier cycles.

Despite the apparent absence of leaders, the tasks of coordination, logistics, tactical deliberation, as well as agenda-setting and decision-making, were not 'spontaneous' or improvised but relied on dense networks and intermediary coordinators. Traditional social-movement organizations played a role, as did social media. The book gives a detailed picture of how networks were formed among religious groups, medical and legal professionals and secondary-school students. The authors argue that 'peer collaboration', which relies on informal leaders and mechanisms of decision-making, became crucial to sustain the movement. The five demands emerged from a series of collective deliberations in June 2019, rather than from an elite decision-making structure; likewise the catchphrase *laam chau*, 'Burn together', and the slogan 'Liberate Hong Kong, revolution of our times'. Solidarity between different groups of protesters was sustained throughout, they argue, even though the mobilizations alternated between peaceful organized marches (June 9 and 16) and violent spontaneous protest (June 12). After the occupation of the LegCo chamber on 1 July, mass rallies were largely replaced by neighbourhood and sectoral protests, in which informal networks and intermediate leaders played a vital role. Cheng and Yuen conclude that the tactical radicalization of the movement, in contrast with the stability of its claims, was a foreseeable outcome, favoured by factors such as 'outbidding', counter-mobilization and intra-movement dynamics—but accelerating the counter-measures of the state.

As these summaries suggest, there is significant overlap among the conclusions of the three studies, though their emphases differ. Of the movement's causes, Ho stresses the sense of the 2047 'endgame' and the moral outrage it sparked; Cheng and Yuen underscore the synchronization of contingent and structural threats related to the evolution of Hong Kong's hybrid regime; Lee highlights even broader generational and world-systemic factors. All three studies emphasize the movement's distinctive form of leadership, whether described as 'peer-produced' or 'leaderful', or in Lee's description, 'a mosaic of the multitudes in which every tiny dot was a centre of leadership and capacity'. Similarly, there is no major disagreement on the role played by social media. Online platforms offered flexible ways of coordinating actions and debates, though in these readings they ultimately remained a tool—albeit a powerful one—rather than the motor of the protests.

More contentious is the relation between the different components of the movement. All three studies underscore the importance of solidarity, but their portraits of the internal dynamics diverge. A key question is the distinction between peaceful and 'martial' (*yung mou*) protesters. Cheng and Yuen present a continuum of involvement, ranging from donations, messages posted on 'Lennon walls' or participation in peaceful demonstrations, to the 'high-risk' activism that about a third of surveyed participants

declared themselves willing to engage in. Lee, focusing on the experience of ‘frontline’ participants, finds that they viewed violence as a process of overcoming fear and embracing sacrifice, discipline and moral obligation, rather than as liberating in Fanon’s terms. She, too, highlights the mutual understanding, achieved through online discussions and votes, whereby peaceful activists would not condemn violence, while violent protesters would not escalate peaceful events. To what extent the counterposition of ‘peaceful’ and ‘martial’ maps onto Lee’s binary of a ‘passionate minority’ and ‘pragmatic majority’ remains unclear, since the former relates to (non-) violent tactics while the latter presumably involves world outlooks. The movement relied on mutual tolerance of a variety of tactics and convergence around the five demands, but it is less certain that this was underpinned by a broader ideological consensus.

A shortcoming of all three books is their relative lack of attention to the immediate state response. While they mention police violence to varying degrees, there is little differentiation of the respective interventions of the Hong Kong and Beijing governments. Further investigation is needed into the tensions—and bureaucratic competition—between the different administrations, the political messages delivered by various state and non-state actors, and the growing pressures put on civil society. The direct targeting of the Central Government Liaison Office by protesters on 21 July is only mentioned briefly in these studies, but was surely a turning point for Beijing. The tactical considerations of the Hong Kong government; the seeming absence of dissent within its ruling coalition; its stance on police violence; and the Central Government’s role in directing the response—all these questions remain largely unaddressed.

The three works draw similar conclusions about the movement’s aftermath, though with nuances. Lee argues that Hong Kong has entered a long process of decolonization, the outcome of which remains open. Ho compares it to the examples of the Tiananmen exiles, the Taiwan democracy-independence movement and the long struggle of the Baltic states, which eventually succeeded. Cheng and Yuen discuss possible responses to the new status quo in Hong Kong, now that the era of ‘liberal oligarchy’ has ended, along the lines suggested by Albert Hirschman: ‘exit’, ‘voice’, ‘loyalty’ and ‘adaptation’ are the options.

It is not easy to offer a definitive assessment of these studies of the 2019 protests. At the local level, the 2020 and 2024 National Security laws, as well as the reorganization of the electoral system, surely mark the end of the ‘transitional period’ of Hong Kong’s return to Chinese sovereignty. As the US-based (but Hong Kong-born) political economist Ho-fung Hung pointed out in an earlier study, *City on the Edge* (2022), there are clear parallels between the Sino-British Joint Declaration on Hong Kong and the 1951

'Seventeen Point Agreement' through which the young PRC secured control over Tibet. From this perspective, the events of 2019 in Hong Kong mirror the evolution of Tibet in 1959, when protests triggered a military intervention and the *de facto* end of the period of autonomy. Indeed, as Hung notes, Deng Xiaoping explicitly referred to the Tibet agreement as a model during the Sino-British negotiations.

So did the 2019 protests simply serve to accelerate an inevitable outcome? Depending on their perspective, observers have been quick to blame either the protesters for the escalation of violence; or the Hong Kong government—and specifically its ineffective Chief Executive Carrie Lam—for the breakdown in negotiations; or, more obviously, the Beijing government for unilaterally reinterpreting the terms of the handover agreements. As Cheng and Yuen note, 'adapting' to the present situation in Hong Kong is not the same as 'loyalty'. In the 2025 Legislative Council election, turnout fell by over 50 per cent compared to 2019, dropping from 2.94 million to 1.31 million. Although no pro-democracy candidates were vetted to take part in the election under the new system, the total number of votes for the pro-Beijing camp (1.27 million) did not significantly increase compared to the 2019 district elections. But these are still early days, and the continued state- and nation-building efforts of the central and local governments may well put the 'hidden' pro-democracy voters under increased pressure.

The three books also offer broader reflections on our present moment. Lee sees it as the beginning of a new period of confrontation between 'Western neoliberal capitalism and Chinese state capitalism'. This seems overgeneralized, since there is no clear geographical dividing line between liberal democracies and autocracies, nor between advocates of free-market policies and state capitalism. The divisions between proponents of isolationism and imperial expansion increasingly seem to run within each country, whether China or the United States. Few of the many conflicts around the globe can be resolved into such a neat polarization. Cheng and Yuen, meanwhile, point out that 2019 was a global year of protest, which they compare to 1848, 1968 and 1989, momentous dates in the making of the contemporary world. The 2019 protests may have marked a moment of generational challenge, but did they produce a comparably consequential chain of interlinked events? While the revolutions of 1848 were largely defeated, they planted the seeds of democracy and national self-determination. The student protests of 1968 against the post-war dispensation decisively challenged social norms and hierarchies. The fall of the Berlin Wall marked the end of the Cold War and the beginning of the present world order. If 2019 was indeed such a year, its meaning still eludes us.