Popular Culture in Hong Kong After the National Security Law, 2020–2022

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First published 2025

ISBN: 9781032860893 (hbk)
ISBN: 9781032860916 (pbk)
ISBN: 9781003521280 (ebk)

Chapter 3

Generational Contests: Re-forming, Re-educating, and De-radicalizing "Useless Youths"

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DOI: 10.4324/9781003521280-4

The funder of the Open Access version of this chapter is The Professional Staff Congress - City University of New York (PSC-CUNY) Research Award Program.

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

3 Generational Contests

Re-forming, Re-educating, and De-radicalizing "Useless Youths"

Faicing 廢青 Useless Youth

By the mid-2010s, and especially after 2019, young people in Hong Kong became the target of much censure. They were often blamed for Hong Kong's societal unrest of the previous two decades and accused of becoming continuously more radical over the years. Their activism was denigrated as refusing honest work and causing chaos. When they walked out of their classes and jobs during the Occupy Movement in 2014 to demand universal suffrage in the election of the city's officials, they were called *faicing* 廢青 (useless youth/young losers). When they protested against the "The Fugitive Offenders and Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters" in 2019's Anti-Legislation Protests, they were vilified as "*haak bou* 黑暴 black rioters." Their efforts to transform society into one that they felt was more democratic and just were dismissed as selfishness and naiveté. In 2022, the Secretary for Education at the time, Kevin Yeung, castigated the city's youth for being "passive and self-indulgent," lacking in ambition and incapable of social advancement.[1] They were a "problem" that needed to be "solved." This chapter is about young people in Hong Kong, the subject of much societal consternation and opprobrium. I will discuss the political and social contradictions between young people and the greater society, and the government strategies to deradicalize them.

Contempt toward young people in Hong Kong predated the 2019 protests. The former Legislative Council member and former lecturer in Social Work who specialized in youth issues, Shiu Ka-chun 邵家臻,[2] discovered that while the term *faicing* (useless youths) had little currency in the city prior to 2014 according to Google statistics, searches for it shot up to 31 points (out of a hundred) in October 2014. By the summer of 2015, the search rate reached 100 points. The direct cause for the sudden rise in interest in the term was the 87 cartridges of tear gas fired by the police on September 28, 2014, to disperse demonstrators against China's proposed reforms to Hong Kong's electoral system. This proposal required all candidates running for Chief Executive of Hong Kong to be pre-approved by Beijing.[3] This was the first use of tear gas and weapons against protestors in Hong Kong since 1967. The civil action was known as the Umbrella Movement because demonstrators hoisted umbrellas to shield themselves from the tear gas and streams of pepper spray directed at them by the police. This expanded into

DOI: 10.4324/9781003521280-4
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the full-scale Occupy Movement, which effectively shut down major parts of the city. High school and university students walked out of their classes to join the occupation, resulting in the largest student school strike in Hong Kong's history. Those who opposed the movement accused the young protestors of lazing around, doing nothing all day, instead of pursuing their education and becoming contributing members of society.

The Occupy Movement lasted for 79 days. However, though officially not attending school, the young participants were not idle. Many teachers and professors moved their classrooms to the streets to accommodate their students. In the larger Occupy areas like Admiralty, special study and classroom areas were set up for these purposes. It was also not uncommon to see young people reading quietly and studying in their tents. They would take turns to do chores to keep the area clean and organized. In the essay, "I am a *faicing*," essayist, Daam-daam 淡淡, mused upon this designation as she reflected on her own experience in the student movement:

> In recent months, the term *faicing* frequently appears, especially on the Internet. What kind of people use this term? It's hard to generalize. Some belong to a particular color (blue for pro-establishment; yellow for pro-democracy). Some are apparently very worldly and were just here to watch the drama. I will call them the "opposite side." (I could use another term, but that would just be an insult to the term.)
>
> According to the perception of the "opposite side," those who occupy the streets are all *faicing*. I accept this provisionally. But then what do I see these so-called *faicing* do?
>
> I see the concrete jungle covered with pieces of paper on which are written words of encouragement and positivity, turning an ice-cold wall into a colorful one. I see a whole street of colorful umbrellas and tents, like a harmonious and friendly little community. I help deliver boxes of materials to be distributed to the *faicing*, who are working with each other. I help with the cleaning; I wash the grounds and sweep away the rubbish. I see the wash basin and toilets filled with donated toiletries. There are stickers everywhere reminding one to care for the environment and to keep the place clean. In Admiralty, there are study rooms, lecterns, DIY woodshops, and tools for weaving cushions for sitting. Every day, volunteers arrive from different places. At first no one knows anyone, but after initial greetings, they all work together to contribute to the building of this community. They are self-sufficient, self-motivated, peaceful, and orderly—it has been a month.[4]

Rather than being irresponsible and lazy, these "*faicing*" reconfigured their occupied areas into functional communes that celebrated equality, mutuality, and community. Dapiran argues,

> [t]he Umbrella Movement became performative of the kind of society it hoped Hong Kong would become—a peaceful, self-regulating community, built on mutual support and sharing, a gift economy of donated goods and services, all

> of which were a far cry from the self-interested rampant capitalism for which Hong Kong was known.[5]

As Agnes Chow周庭, one of the student leaders mentioned in the Introduction, explained at the time, "Young people's responsibility is to awaken others to the values beyond the dominant ones, to lead society to another kind of transformation. That is our responsibility."[6] Far from doing nothing all day, these "*faicing*" demonstrated the kind of society they wanted and were capable of building.

Though "*faicing*" was derogatory, young people began to embrace it, turning it into a badge of honor. Shiu explains:

> Young people not only did not reject this label, but they have even created social media groups, such as "I am a *faicing*," "There is a kind of elite called *faicing*," "*faicing*-ism," "*Faicing* Affairs Association," etc. There is a web essay, "*Ngo si faicing* 我是廢青 (I am a *faicing*)," and a web song, "*Hoenggong git ceot faicing* 香港傑出廢青 (Hong Kong's outstanding *faicing*)," all equally powerful and uncompromising. They are all "*cultural experts* (original in English)." They exploit this uselessness--uselessness is not without use. It is just as the lyricist, Lam Yat Hey林日曦 said, "Rather than let you label me this way, I'll label myself first." Self-satire is the world's most powerful weapon.[7]

The song, "*Hoenggong git ceot faicing* 香港傑出廢青 (Hong Kong outstanding *faicing*) (2015)," composed and sung by Michael Lai 黎曉, with lyrics by Lam Yat Hey 林日曦, plays on the title, *Hoenggong gitceot cingnin* 香港傑出青年 (Outstanding Young Persons), annually conferred on ten young persons judged exemplary for their contribution to the city by the Junior Chamber of Commerce International. This song makes fun of Hong Kong society's values and measures of success while asserting the ideals of the *faicing*:

> We don't have the heavy burden of a mortgage yet, nor any enormous bills to pay. We still have the luxury to trust in what we see with our own eyes and can still spend whole nights worrying about certain truths. Too busy dreaming, I don't feel I am a zero. I am too busy using my hands to work for the betterment of the world.
> Even if this "me" is very useless (*fai* 廢)
> But I'm still more passionate than those in power.
> I can fire up my strong determination to fight against the giants.
> I put my heart into my role as a little ant.
> I am ultimately an outstanding little ant.
> ....
> Among the ruins, I can find myself a space to express myself.
> You criticize me for being willful; criticize me for being impatient; criticize me for being petulant and perpetually disobedient; criticize me for being too self-centered; criticize me for being a useless youth (*faicing*).

> Even if this "me" is very foolish, I have not become ridiculous. Even if being like this means I am penniless, I might still be rich in my heart. Within the worldly conventions, I want to establish a unique little kingdom. I may be unconventional, but that doesn't mean I am useless. I don't want to become too used to how things are. Being young doesn't mean being useless. I don't want to follow your upward climb. Staying behind doesn't mean being useless. When I find something I believe in, I will fight to death for it.

If being successful in Hong Kong meant endlessly climbing the social and economic ladder, only to be trapped in a life of debts, then many young people proudly embraced the title, *faicing*, choosing to be guided by other kinds of social values and meaning instead. Indeed, many scholars have pointed out the "post-materialist" turn in Hong Kong's society beginning in the 2000s, especially after the devastating SARS epidemic in 2003. Rather than money and social status, liberal universal values such as democracy and free speech were considered much more critical to life for this generation of young people.[8] In a 2016 study, the University of Hong Kong found that an overwhelming majority of young people believed that poverty existed in Hong Kong because of "the development of the modern society" and "an unjust society." Rather than financial stability or material comfort, more important to them were social equality and freedom of speech, as well as "opportunities for citizens to voice their opinions in important government decisions."[9] As Shiu sums it up, "In terms of economics, '*faicing*' are those who disagree with the '*Zung waan gaa zik*' 中環價值' (value of Hong Kong's Central Business District), and in terms of politics, '*faicing*' are those who oppose authoritarianism."[10] This explained why many young people were willing to spend months sleeping on the streets, risking their futures, and enduring tear gas and pepper spray to fight for democracy.

These ideals continued to influence young people in 2019. Another study in 2020 found that of the 712 surveyed aged between 15 and 25, over 70% had participated at least once in political activities in 2019. These ranged from signing a petition to donating money and supplies, and to front-line protest activities. Within this group, 93.5% were university educated and 85.2% were secondary school students. To this cohort of young people, "conservative values," such as wealth, power, and social status, were insignificant. However, rated as very important to them were "universal and collective Values, such as, 'Freedom of opinion,' 'Democracy,' and 'Freedom at any cost.'"[11]

These values held by Hong Kong's young people translated to their attitude toward work as well. Angus Chan, the director of an independent think tank on youth issues, MWYO, noted that while in the past, most people looked for work with stable income, in recent years, those with multiple professional identities and jobs, that is, "slashers (/)," had become common: "Young people do not need the same kind of stability. They'd rather have freedom or aspire to doing things that are of help to others or have social meaning." Chan concluded that young people now were a lot more mature than most people assumed. They did not just think about themselves; they had strong social awareness.[12]

Fonghei nincingjan 放棄年青人 Give Up on Young People: Generational War

The contradictions between young people and the establishment reached an apogee in 2019. During the 2019 Anti-Legislation protests, when high school children also started joining university students in the school strike, the 71-year-old (at the time) Hong Kong billionaire, Wu Suk-ching, 伍淑清, heiress of Maxim's Catering, one of the largest restaurant conglomerates in Hong Kong and a member of the Standing Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, famously pointed out that because of the lack of patriotic education in Hong Kong, young people had been brainwashed by social media, and had become anti-government, anti-establishment, anti-China, and because of this, Hong Kong had already lost two generations of young people. She, therefore, declared,

> I will give up on young people (*ngo wui fonghei nincingjan* 我會放棄年輕人). I will not waste any more time to say anything more to them, because they are no longer clear in their heads about what they should do.[13]

To many young protestors, Wu also committed the ultimate treachery by traveling to the United Nations Human Rights Council with Pansy Ho, another billionaire businesswoman and chairperson of the Hong Kong Federation of Women, to denounce the protests. In their report to the UN, Wu and Ho defended the police use of tear gas and rubber bullets against unarmed protestors, with Wu saying, "Police all over the world use tear gas and rubber bullets. This is not unique to Hong Kong."[14] At the same hearing, although evidence abounded that the protest received wide support from all sectors of the Hong Kong society, Ho argued that the small number of protesters did not represent the opinions of the 7.5 million Hong Kong people. They had no right to disrupt the whole society.[15] Ho also expressed concern about the economic impact of the protest:

> Not only the tourist industry and the restaurant businesses, but the whole of our economy is also suffering from different levels of challenges. The most heartbreaking is the situation of our small businesses. They cannot continue to operate. Till this moment, there hasn't been a way to repair all the destroyed public facilities, nor is it possible to have every single one of them repaired. Many people do not even have the convenience of public transportation. They cannot even go out. They cannot return to their place of work. Consumption has contracted about 70%.[16]

Ho's apparent concern for small businesses and workers did not detract from the fact that she is from one of the wealthiest families in Hong Kong. Ho is the daughter of Stanley Ho, the gambling king of Macao, who had a monopoly on Macao's gambling industry for 40 years till 1999. The Ho family business empire included 19 casinos and hotels in Macao, a large share of the Macau International Airport, and other transportation facilities, among other things. The young protestors wanted a

future that was in accordance with their moral values, including social and wealth equality. This challenge to the existing social order was strenuously denounced by the establishment and its corporate accessories.

For her unsympathetic, even hostile, attitude toward Hong Kong's young people, the Maxim heiress received much commendation in China. Wu was named a "*Gamdung Zunggwok nindou janmat* 感動中國年度人物, 2019 (Person who touched China's heart, 2019)," by the Chinese Central Television (CCTV, China's state broadcaster), and also, "2019 Global Overseas Chinese Person of the Year," by the *New Chinese News Agency*, the Chinese state media agency. In Hong Kong, however, Wu was much hated. There were boycotts of all the businesses owned by and affiliated with Maxim's, from Maxim's bakeries, fast food restaurants, and catering services, to Starbucks (which Maxim had acquired the rights to operate in Hong Kong). Many of Maxim's retail outlets became targets of the protestors' rage. Many had had their windows smashed in and vandalized. Maxim's eventually made a public statement to distance the corporation from Wu, announcing that she did not have any official position in the corporation. Whether one agreed or not with Wu's estimation about the protesters' behavior and the police's response, there was no doubt that she had declared a generational war by publicly announcing that she was giving up on the young people.

No Future

The divide between these heiresses and the young people in the city was more than just politics. There was obviously a huge class chasm between them. Wu and Ho inherited vast fortunes and privileges from their families. As such, they had inordinate power. Captured in the term, *faicing*, was more than a moral reproach; there was also an implied contempt for the less privileged. As the financial commentator, Zau Hin 周顯, explains, the term was not applied to all rebellious young people, only to those of particular socioeconomic background:

> Everyone knows that there are many *faicing* in Hong Kong. Generally speaking, there are two types of *faicing*. The first kind is proactive. They have a lot of friends with the same ideas, and they often participate in radical political activities. The other kind is passive. They spend all day at home listlessly. They are also called "invisible youths."
>
> However, both kinds of *faicing* share the same characteristics. These are, refusal to work, being chronically out of work, or have a negative attitude towards work. They are more often out of work than working, or inattentive when working… simply speaking, so-called "*faicing*" are to a large extent, defined by economic conditions. For example, offsprings of wealthy families who don't work and spend all day touring different places or chasing after women will never be called "*faicing*." Similarly, a talented young man in finance will never be called "*faicing*" even if he participates in radical politics.[17]

In profiling the participants of the Anti-Legislation movement, researchers discovered that 22.2% were between the ages of 25–29. The largest group, at 27%, was between the ages of 20–24, with the next largest between the ages of 30–34, at 19.7%. In terms of educational level, 77.9% of the protesters reported having a tertiary level of education or above. This means the main driving force in this protest was Hong Kong's elite workforce or potential elite workforce. However, while 49.1% of this group self-identified as belonging to the middle class, 41.7% labeled themselves as belonging to the lower class, perhaps indicating a trend of downward social mobility among this population.[18]

Aside from issues of democracy and Beijing's encroachment on Hong Kong's governance, at least a part of what fueled all the protests through the 2000s was dissatisfaction with the government's inability or unwillingness to deal with the city's pressing social issues. The society's competitive capitalist culture and relentless emphasis on financial and real estate development led to severe income and wealth inequality. Hong Kong's Gini coefficient measured in 2016 was 0.539 (compared to 0.314 in South Korea in the same year, and 0.398 in the United States last measured in 2021).[19] The city's coffin homes in subdivided flats were world-famous. The infusion of capital from China after the Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement (CEPA) in 2003 led to an economic boom in Hong Kong that mostly benefitted the business elite and the older, propertied class. However, it drove up housing prices to such an extent that before the market was hit by COVID and the emigration wave in 2020, an average apartment was 18.1 times the gross annual median income.[20] In a study by Tang Heiwai, he discovered that

> from 2000 to 2020, the annual GDP went up 89%. The general economic performance seemed satisfactory. However, at the same time the growth of median household income was only 68%, while the household expenditure for those living in apartments in private developments suitable for a family of four went up sharply by 306%. Even those who had no intention of purchasing real estate suffered from the pressure of rising food costs, because during this period, they increased over 80%.[21]

Hong Kong persistently held the dubious distinction of being the world's most expensive city. The living standards of the younger, salaried, and the unpropertied lower and middle classes continued to deteriorate over the years.[22] Young people, even those with advanced academic degrees, were often trapped in uninspiring and low-paying jobs. A study in 2020, undertaken by the pro-Beijing political parties, New Century Forum and New Youth Forum, to examine the income level of college-degree holders in the city between 1989 and 2019, found that in 1989, there were 46,500 college graduates employed in low-skill jobs (11% of the total number of college graduates). In 2019, the number had gone up to 179,900 (16.2%). A comparison of the actual value of the monthly income of college graduates (adjusted according to inflation) reveals that in 1989, the median income was $16,587. In 2019, it was $14,986.[23] Young people had trouble establishing independent lives

and were forced to live with their parents well into adulthood because they could not afford their own housing.[24] According to Joeng Hou-sing 楊皓鋮,

> overall, the new generation, compared to the baby boom generation, has a higher level of cultural capital. However, at present, although on average, there have been progressive increases in the salaries of college graduates, fundamentally, these cannot catch up to inflation. Compared to the rise in real estate prices since 1997, salaries have actually decreased. In other words, in general, in Hong Kong, young people are commonly rich in cultural capital, but poor in financial capital...Youth with "High educational level but low-income level" is a structural phenomenon. Young people are now faced with more and more job insecurity—their salaries cannot catch up to inflation. It is already considered very fortunate if one's contract is renewed every year. More and more people are choosing or forced to do temp work.[25]

The three years of COVID restrictions compounded young people's misery. The general unemployment rate in the city rose from 3.5% in January 2020 to almost 6.5% in October 2020. Within this, the youth unemployment rate was particularly startling at 12.01%, almost reaching the level of the 2009 worldwide recession of 12.53%.[26]

A report to the Legislative Council by the Welfare and Labour Bureau in May 2019 further projected a pessimistic future for Hong Kong's well-educated young people. This study was done before the city was hit by the emigration wave following the enactment of the NSL and did not account for the resultant brain drain by 2022. It estimated that by 2027, there would be a shortage of 77,000 workers with below twelfth-grade level of education, 43,000 workers with a high school diploma, and 51,000 workers with undergraduate college degrees. However, among those with post-graduate degrees, there would be an excess of 16,000 people. Despite this dismal prognosis, young people were still urged to forego impractical ideals and individual interests to pursue university degrees in order to enter professions that purportedly provide income and material stability.

Notwithstanding poor job prospects and declining income value, in 2014, the Hong Kong Housing Authority and Housing Department evaluated the possibility of banning those with tertiary academic degrees from applying for public or government-sponsored housing. This was prompted by heated discussions in the city in which social commentators accused college graduates who applied for public housing of lack of ambition and shamed them for taking advantage of the welfare system and for competing with underprivileged families for government handouts. The 2009–2015 chairperson of the government's Commissioner on Youth, Chan Chung-bun陳振彬 (age 58 at the time), admonished young people:

> Don't apply for public housing immediately after you graduate because that is too sad. I feel this is a sad issue. Why? There is no reason one should give up on oneself so quickly...I worked for five or six years, before I put down a down

> payment and got a mortgage to pay for an apartment that belonged to me. Only this can be called youthful vigor. That's why I think there's a bit of perversion in their thinking.[27]

Similarly, Shih Wing Ching 施永青 (age 71 at the time), a property magnate, who owns *Centraline*, the largest property agency in Hong Kong and China, also chastised them:

> Young people should be diligent in their studies to acquire knowledge and skill in order to perform well at work. They have a chance to increase their income only if they do their work well. They must also be willing to save money. Restrain short term consumption. Once they've saved enough money, they can buy real estate. But many refuse to save money. When others advise them to reduce their spending, they accuse them of being detached from reality. They don't realize how detached they themselves are. They live at home and live on their parents. Now, that's really being detached from reality.[28]

Young people's despair about their prospects was captured in Flowdoc's 2020 song, "How to fly," in which he describes an individual's sense of hopelessness, trapped in the meaningless and unforgiving work culture of the city:

> One wants to excel but is defeated by reality. Put one's helmet on, become like a machine in society, work every day like a draft animal. I'd rather be a black swan that can only spread its wings once. No need for society to teach me how to succeed. I know I am stubborn. I believe in myself and not the will of heaven. That's why I am writing down line after line, these words of mine:
>
> *I don't wanna die Don't tell me how to fly All the strings pulling tight Trying to keep me from the sky I don't wanna die Don't tell me how to fly...*
>
> The daily rising GDP is like the emperor's new clothes. The things that have been troubling young people--looking and seeking, how will we ever know the answers? When my thoughts become tangled, I can only light a cigarette. Constantly surrounded by anxieties, repeating, replaying every day, how many years have I wasted wallowing in mediocrity?
>
> *I don't wanna die Don't tell me how to fly*... (English in the original in Italics.)[29]

Politically disenfranchised and economically straitened, the prospect for many young Hong Kong people was bleak. At the same time, a study published by *Youth Ideas*, a research center under the *Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups*, reported that 71.4% of the 525 young people interviewed "believed the government did not attach much importance to encouraging young people's development."[30] Young people were blamed for upsetting the peace, criticized for being spoilt and lazy, and for creating trouble on the streets instead of working hard for unachievable social and economic goals. There is little surprise that many felt betrayed and abandoned by society.

What Do Young People Want?

Perhaps Hong Kong's young people needed to learn from their mainland counterparts. The Hong Kong political writer, Baau-But 鮑渤, wrote in 2017 that mainland youths were more driven and ambitious. They were headed in the "correct" direction. Their hunger for success had resulted in a much more advanced and superior society:

> If we compare the level of optimism and happiness among young people from the three places on the two coasts (Hong Kong, the mainland, and Taiwan), in general, mainland young people are superior. I recently went to Beijing for a conference on new media. Those giving talks were mostly successful entrepreneurs born in the 1980s. Some were even born in the 1990s and have not even graduated from college yet. They were going on about, "venture capital," "angel round," "B round," immediately making one feel in awe of these young people…
>
> Last week, I went to a little restaurant in a shopping mall in Shenzhen. There was no menu, no wait staff, no one to give you a bill. It was amazing. One just scanned the QR code at the door and deliciously prepared food would appear before your eyes together with the bill. From ordering food, making additional orders, finding prices, application of discounts, to payment, these were all completed on your cell phone. Hong Kong people would not know how to operate the system and probably could not even get a meal there or might be regarded as members of the "Low-End Population,"[31] who need looking after. [32]

Baau-But could not have foreseen, when he wrote his piece in 2017, that in 2020, when COVID swept the world, scanning QR codes to prove their vaccine status was the only way Hong Kong people could enter all large and small public facilities and order food in restaurants. Also in 2021, struggling to survive in the highly competitive environment, many young people in China rebelled by declaring they would "lie flat," advocating, "Don't buy property; don't buy a car; don't get married; don't have children; and don't consume."[33] This "lying flat" movement spread quickly among young people in China until it was condemned by the Chinese government and its various mouthpieces. All the social media groups organized around this topic were also quickly shut down.

In his starry-eyed assessment of Chinese young people, Baau-But did not take into consideration the human and social costs of ever-striving ambition. His unexamined notion of success and trust in technological development reflected a typical "Central Business District value" that many Hong Kong young people rejected.

Despite Baau-But's pessimism about Hong Kong young people's seeming lack of motivation compared to their mainland counterparts, Angus Chan of the youth issues think tank, *MWYO*, reported that data gathered in the third quarter of 2021 showed that there was actually an increase in the number of young people joining the workforce. Among those aged between 15 and 19, and 20 and 24, 9.9%

and 59.5%, respectively, participated in the workforce. This reflected an increase from the previous year of 1.6% and 1.3%. Also, from May to June 2020, full-time workers aged between 15 and 24 worked an average of 44.4 hours each week, higher than the overall average of 44.3 hours.[34] More young people had been working and had in fact been working more hours than the general workforce despite public perception.

A major obstacle for a sizeable number of young people's social advancement was the legal consequences of their participation in the 2019 protest. From the start of the Anti-Legislation movement in 2019 to July 2021, 10,260 had been arrested; 6000 of them were under the age of 25. Among the total number arrested, 39% were students, and 17% (1754 individuals) were under 18. Most were still awaiting court trials and anticipating different kinds of legal consequences 2 years after the protests.[35] Those who had already completed their time in detention or prison struggled with the reality of living with criminal records. The schools, whether high school or universities in which they were enrolled before their arrests, often would not readmit them, claiming they would no longer be able to fit in. Without being able to complete their education, their job prospects were limited even if they were able to convince employers to overlook their criminal records. For some, who might ultimately be proven innocent, the lengthy legal process could drag on for years.[36] Even among those who had not officially been charged or had not served time, many suffered from PTSD or emotional distress from the violence during the protests and subsequent suppressions.

The prominent Hong Kong writer, Dung Kai Cheung 董啟章, reflected on young people's situation at the time, comparing it to that of his own era. He pointed out that the difference between these two different generations could easily be seen in the subject matter of popular songs:

> People like me who grew up in the 1970s and 1980s used to listened to so-called "motivational songs." At that time, all the well-known singers sang motivational songs. Danny Chan was the best among them. His classic, "*zaak sing* 摘星 Reaching for the Star," goes without saying. When I was young, my favorite song I was "*fei ceot heoi* 飛出去 Flying Out." It is a song that celebrates parental love. The last few lines, "It's difficult to become hardy grass in a nursery/ Young people have dreams / don't want to be hot-housed / I just want to fulfill my ambition / my goal I vow to reach," were really rousing. Now, these lyrics sound very out of date, very naïve and quite nauseating. But there are contextual reasons for this. In the 1980s, Hong Kong was at its most affluent. There were plenty of opportunities. Life was stable and peaceful. It was the most optimistic of times. The world was also relatively peaceful. At that time, there were definitely reasons to believe one's life and the world were beautiful, and all one's dreams could be fulfilled.
>
> Today we are no longer that naïve. Young people's experience today is formed from growing up amongst ruins. It's not just ruins in the material sense, but also in the spiritual sense. They have to confront "endless setbacks," "the world collapsing," and "streets filled with sorrow." (Quotes are lyrics of different

> songs.) Even if this difficult situation is not completely disheartening, all they can hope for is "at least there's an inch that hasn't been corrupted," as a "girl from the ruins."[37] To the new generation, the "motivational" is either too simplistic or too extravagant. This is not because they are not brave enough, or because they are without ideals. It is because they have been baptized in reality, which means they have suffered trauma. People who are hurt need healing, not motivation.[38]

Re-educating Young People

Despite numerous studies and analyses, Hong Kong authorities seemed incapable of understanding, or were oblivious to, the feelings and needs of the young people. The Hong Kong Secretary for Education at the time, Kevin Yeung, who had accused young people of being "passive and self-indulgent" (mentioned at the beginning of the chapter), recommended teaching "diligence" as part of the school curriculum.[39] Similarly, in a speech on March 31, 2022, the then Chief Secretary for Administration and the chairperson of the Youth Development Commission (YDC), John Lee Ka Chiu (Hong Kong's chief executive since 2022), suggested teaching positive thinking:

> With members' concerted efforts, the YDC has continuously enhanced and expanded various initiatives, including deepening young people's life planning, facilitating young people's upward mobility, strengthening communication with young people, etc. It will further nurture young people's positive thinking and help them develop positive values.[40]

In her 2021 policy address, the chief executive at the time, Carrie Lam, announced new strategies to address the city's youth issues that also included "positive thinking." She pledged that the government would continue to assist young people,

> offering opportunities in entrepreneurship, career development, internship and exchange on the Mainland, as well as strengthening of the work of the six disciplined services and two auxiliary services on nurturing young people's positive thinking and awareness of law-abidingness.[41]

The Disciplined Services, which included the Police and Correctional Services, had already demonstrated how they could contribute to "fixing" the youth problem in 2019. It seemed the official solution to everything that ailed Hong Kong's young people was to inculcate them with the right kind of political and social value, or the right kind of work ethics and punish them when they failed to conform.

Along this vein, the government authorities blamed Hong Kong's youth problems on their high school education, in particular, a course in the general curriculum called "Liberal Studies." This course was initially designed to train critical thinking and social awareness among students, considered important skills for a responsible citizen to carry out his or her civic responsibilities. However,

Carrie Lam's government insisted that the course taught subversive thinking and encouraged students to question authority, resulting in their radicalization. Even though numerous studies, including those conducted by the government's Education Bureau, had demonstrated that this was not the case,[42] in November 2020, hardly a year after the protests, the Secretary of Education put forth a proposal to change the substance of "Liberal Studies." The former lawmaker for the education sector, Ip Kin-yuen, criticized the government for blaming "Liberal Studies" for the 2019 social unrest because "[t]hey [had] to hide the responsibility of the government's maladministration for causing such uproar in society."[43]

Distrust of young people, dismissal of their efforts, and denigration of their political aspirations seemed to have become a government stance in Hong Kong. It necessitated strategies to reform and reign them in, to transform them from an unruly, disgruntled mob to a disciplined, hardworking labor force for the continued "stability and prosperity" of the city. The age-old strategies of propaganda, discipline, and censorship were now fully deployed to order the minds of the young. The rock band, Yusobeit, described this as a "*Gwaaimat juksing gaiwaak* 怪物育成計劃 (The scheme for cultivating monsters) (2020)":

> The school bell rings. The race begins. Teacher mother said, please hand in your homework. Remember to practice your mental arithmetic, gymnastics, and study German. The most important thing is to use your brain. No need for entertainment. You have already learned how to be successful at age three, how to swim upstream. By seven, you need to know how to wield the power of the buzz to prove your superiority. If you can claim to be the absolute best, then you'll be happy. This is what life is all about. You must obey the teaching. You must obey...
>
> You have heard the teachings hundreds and thousands of times. You have already handed in a lot of homework. You refused laughter. You refused longings. You could have won, but you still feel powerless. How is it possible you can't reach the top?
>
> You cannot be happy; you cannot have everything. You have gone through hopelessness, trying to obey your superiors. You should be the rising star. When you completed your education, you will be successful. Give it all to the world. You are strong, like a monster.
>
> *Let go, let go, let go of him, Let go, let go, let go of her, Let go, let go, let go of us Monster, monster is coming to town*.
>
> *You say, you say, you say that's bad Too late, too late, too late, you made us We don't need no need no this--Come on Come on Monsters we are*. (Words originally in English in Italics.)[44]

In the Spring of 2021, a new school curriculum was readied for approval by the Curriculum Development Council. In a speech to the Education Bureau's sponsored forum, Hong Kong's then Chief Executive, Carrie Lam, urged educators and teachers to support the new curriculum and the government's effort to instill love for the city and the fatherland among young people, in order to quell their

rebelliousness. Her speech was titled, "*Fongfaan ninhingjan bei leijung ngaihoi gwokgaa oncyun* 防範年輕人被利用危害國家安全 (Preventing young people from being manipulated into endangering the nation)":

> We hope to do some preventive work, to deter behaviors that endanger the nation and Hong Kong; to stop foreign powers from taking advantage of the citizens, in particular, the young people, making them behave in ways that will endanger the nation. How can we, through public education, school education, help the general public to have a better handle on the spirit of the "Basic Law," and understand the relationship between "One Country" and "Two systems" in their daily lives? This is a responsibility we all need to take on now... I hope we can all take it upon ourselves to foster in our young people a notion of nationhood, a love for Hong Kong, an international perspective, and a sense responsibility toward the society.[45]

The two major teachers' unions in Hong Kong were divided in their support for this new curriculum. Tin Fong-chak, vice president of the Professional Teachers' Union, pointed out that the design of the new course was not to benefit students but for political ends. He said, "The government and people from the pro-Beijing camp have made Hong Kong's education system a scapegoat for the anti-government protests in 2019."[46]

Dau coeng meng 鬥長命 Whoever Lives Longer Wins

For a generation that had grown up amid many political demonstrations and cut its teeth in the 2012 anti-national education protest, the implementation of the new curriculum was yet another defeat. When asked what the next step would be for the pro-democracy movement after the suppression of the 2019 protests, unrepentant despite facing a prison sentence at the time, the young activist, Joshua Wong said,

> We are now in a competition with Xi Jinping, to see who's going to live longer. Everyone knows very well he is an authoritarian and a dictator. As long as he remains China's premier, the chances for democracy in Hong Kong are zero. Let's see who will live longer--the millennials or Xi Jinping's premiership. Hong Kong's younger generation has determination, and they are many times braver than me.

Wong added that the struggle for democracy and freedom was an "infinity war."[47]

In other words, the young activists were in a longevity contest, "*dau coeng meng* 鬥長命," with the aging political authorities. After all, time was on their side. Wong and all the other young activists would most likely outlive those presently in power in both China and Hong Kong, who were all in their 60s and older. After that, there would be another generation of young people to continue the dream. As Wong explained, "After the baptism by fire last year, the struggle is in Hong Kong people's DNA."[48] This gene will keep being passed on, expressing

itself with the right constellation of factors. As long as there is life, there are possibilities.

During the Commercial Radio's annual Ultimate Song Chart Award ceremony on January 1, 2022, the presenter, DJ Jim Yan少爺占 (Master Jim) played on this idea. Because a company selling *reishi* mushroom health products was the sponsor of the show, tickets to the event were awarded by lottery to those who bought the products. Master Jim quipped that in order to get a ticket to the event, one had to eat a lot of *reishi* mushrooms. However, he said, that was a good thing because one was now in a longevity race, *dau coeng meng*. Without the need for elaboration or explanation, the audience erupted in cheers.

In Corrupt the Youth's book, *Daai bun zithoksyu seong gaai heoi* 帶本哲學書上街去(*Taking a philosophy book to the streets*), the writers discuss the value of this long-term view of things:

> No one can have a complete handle on the whole situation. Does this not tell us that we deserve to have hope? How do you know you are not like the citizens of the Soviet Union before it fell? Who can tell you whether you are or not? The issue is, we can only know whether we will be successful or not if we persevere. Change will only be possible if we persevere. We can only hope to succeed in changing the reality. If you give up and no longer insist, change is naturally not possible. Then, naturally, there is no way to talk about hope. In history, there are many examples of success after painful persistence to the end. But there are also a lot of examples of ultimate failures despite many diligent attempts. If we don't persevere, then we won't need to have, and should not have, hope, because we will definitely fail. That is why hope is something we fight for. That is why some say, "It is not because there's hope that we persist. It is because we persist that there is hope."[49]

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