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## 30 Years After Tiananmen

# HONG KONG REMEMBERS

*Benny Tai*

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Innocent university students chat easily inside the tents at Tiananmen Square. Intellectuals openly share their dreams for China's future. Young boys and girls suffer selflessly in hunger strikes. Thousands of citizens raise banners to show their support. Faceless soldiers march ruthlessly into Beijing. A fearless man plants himself steadfastly before a file of tanks. Bloody bodies lie inertly in the streets.

These are the collective memories burned into the minds of most Hong Kong people over forty. Those who are younger can learn about what happened thirty years ago in the capital of China if they wish, as there is still a free flow of information in Hong Kong. The June 4 vigil to commemorate those who died in the Tiananmen Massacre is still being held every year, as it has been since 1989. The souls of Tiananmen Square never leave Hong Kong.

I was a student leader in Hong Kong in the 1980s, while I was in my twenties and studying law at the University of Hong Kong. I joined many rallies in Hong Kong in the spring and summer of 1989 supporting the student movement in Beijing. Having taken part for more than thirty years in the democratic movement in Hong Kong, I have witnessed three landmark events in Hong Kong's ongoing struggle for democracy. All bear some relationship, direct or otherwise, to the Tiananmen Square protests.

The first event was the protest movement itself, or more specifically, the response it evoked in Hong Kong. By way of background, I should explain that five years prior to Tiananmen, in 1984, the government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) under the Chinese Communist

Party (CCP) signed an agreement with Britain on the future of Hong Kong. China would resume exercising sovereignty over Hong Kong on 1 July 1997, and Hong Kong (so the promise went) would enjoy a high degree of autonomy as a Special Administrative Region of the PRC. The CCP began to draft the Basic Law, the new constitution for post-1997 Hong Kong, and the British authorities began introducing representative government into Hong Kong during the transitional period.

The democratic movement in Hong Kong can date its first stirrings to this time. Students and others in Hong Kong demanded the immediate adoption of democratic elections as the sole means for choosing the local legislative body. I was among those who helped to plan the demonstrations that voiced this demand, but I was well aware that only a relative handful of people—mostly students and intellectuals, plus some professionals—were activists in pursuing this democratic dream for Hong Kong.

It was the students in Tiananmen Square, almost two-thousand kilometers to our north, who in 1989 turned the democracy movement into a mass phenomenon in Hong Kong. The protesters in Beijing wanted to see a crackdown on corruption, and more freedoms for the people. Although they stopped short of explicitly demanding democracy, their movement came to be viewed from the vantage point of Hong Kong as a democratic movement. On two occasions in late May 1989, more than a million Hong Kong residents rallied publicly to protest CCP repression and support the students of Tiananmen. In Hong Kong, the call for democracy was no longer restricted to an elite. This was the first landmark event.

The massacre in Beijing on June 4 showed Hong Kong people the depth of the sacrifices that the students and others in China's capital were willing to make for freedom. As 1997 drew nearer, more Hong Kong people began to feel the need to establish a democratic system to defend Hong Kong's way of life against interference by the same CCP authorities who had ordered the Tiananmen Massacre.

The second signal event for Hong Kong's democratic movement came six years after the establishment of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) in 1997 and fourteen years after the Tiananmen Square protests. On 1 July 2003, more than half a million Hong Kong people marched to protest against Tung Chee Hwa, the first chief executive of the HKSAR. This was the biggest public rally that Hong Kong had seen since 1989. Hong Kong people were dissatisfied with Tung's poor governance overall, but what drove them to take to the streets in huge numbers was his attempt to pass vaguely framed security legislation for the HKSAR.

The proposed national-security law roused ghastly memories of the Tiananmen Massacre and returned fears of the CCP to the forefront of public consciousness. Many worried that the national-security law

would become a tool for quashing dissent. The July 1 rally was, in fact, also a protest against the CCP. In the end, the legislation was dropped. Tung resigned eighteen months later.<sup>1</sup>

As they embraced postmaterialist values friendly to democracy, equality, the rule of law, and human rights, more Hong Kong people were coming to question the legitimacy of the undemocratic constitutional system.<sup>2</sup> They demanded direct elections to choose the chief executive as well as the members of the Legislative Council (LegCo), the HKSAR's lawmaking body. Surveys consistently showed that more than half the population of about seven million supported democratic reform. The support ran especially high among young people, those with more years of schooling, and the middle class.<sup>3</sup>

The CCP worried that under universal suffrage—set to arrive by 2008 in keeping with the Basic Law—voters would elect an unacceptable chief executive and hand LegCo to the opposition. That would spell the end of Beijing's control, with Hong Kong possibly even becoming a base from which to subvert the CCP's grip on China as a whole. There were two postponements of universal suffrage in Hong Kong, with the CCP finally promising in December 2007 that the chief executive would be chosen by this means in 2017.

The third landmark moment for Hong Kong's democracy movement came a decade after the security-law controversy. This time, in a way that I did not foresee, I served as the catalyst. After my days as a student leader, I had kept alive my Tiananmen-inspired democratic dreams but did not stand in the front rank of Hong Kong's democracy activists. I preferred instead to study issues of constitutional development and to comment on current political and constitutional disputes.

On 16 January 2013, I published an article in the daily *Hong Kong Economic Journal* arguing that if Hong Kong people wanted democracy, they should make civil disobedience their means to this end. Mass rallies alone, I wrote, could never overcome the obstacles that the CCP had put in the path of democratic reform. My idea quickly drew wide attention.

## The Origin of Occupy Central

In March 2013, I joined Chan Kin-man, a sociology professor at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, and Chu Yiu-ming, a retired Baptist pastor, in initiating the Occupy Central with Love and Peace (OCLP) movement. The media called us the "Occupy trio." Chan was a student of Juan Linz (1926–2013), the world-renowned Spanish scholar of democratization who taught for many years at Yale. Chan hoped to explore whether the successful process of democratization in post-Franco Spain could be replicated in China. For many years, Chan worked to establish and support civil society groups in mainland China. Chu, a veteran social activist, was also one of the key organizers of Operation Yel-

lowbird, which had helped many student leaders and other Tiananmen Square protesters to escape from China to Western countries via Hong Kong. The three of us had seen how the Tiananmen Massacre happened. The souls of Tiananmen Square have remained in our hearts, and never far from our thoughts.

In hundreds of public gatherings, the Occupy Central movement highlighted the meaning and importance of universal suffrage. Three rounds of deliberative meetings and a civil referendum in which around 800,000 people voted were our means for framing a proposal to the CCP regarding methods of electing the HKSAR chief executive. After twenty months, surveys showed that about a quarter of Hong Kong's populace backed civil disobedience as a tool for winning universal and equal suffrage.<sup>4</sup> This amounted to a significant shift in favor of civil disobedience, and we believe it marked a turning point.

On 31 August 2014, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (the PRC's legislature) rejected Occupy Central's proposal. We then set in motion our plan to take things to the streets. The original idea was to occupy a pedestrian area in the Central District, on the north side of Hong Kong Island. The sit-in was to begin on 1 October 2014, which is the PRC's National Day and a public holiday. We instructed protesters to sit down peacefully on the pavement and await removal by the police once permission to stay expired.

In late September, high-school and college students walked out of their classes and headed for Civic Square, in the area of Central that houses the HKSAR government offices. So many additional protesters joined the students that Occupy Central moved the date of its own sit-in forward to September 28. The Hong Kong Police Force (HKPF) blocked off the area adjacent to the government headquarters, causing thousands of protesters to spill into major roads nearby. The police used tear gas in an effort to disperse the protesters, but this only brought even more people to join the demonstrations. Then the HKPF stood pat, opting to forgo the use of greater force. We still do not know exactly why—rumor says that the CCP issued a last-minute directive forbidding bloodshed. Was the CCP anxious to avoid repeating Tiananmen in the streets of Hong Kong?

The protesters maintained their peaceful occupation, setting up hundreds of tents in what soon amounted to a vast urban encampment. Haunted by the nightmare of the Tiananmen Massacre, my two colleagues and I just wanted to bring everyone home safely. Many protesters, however, had come out on their own rather than in response to the organized Occupy Central movement, and they saw no duty to follow any Occupy Central directions. The students refused to retreat without making any gains for democracy, and the protesters continued to occupy the roads. This went on for days, and the inconvenience it caused began to eat away at public support. Many protesters still refused to leave. In

the end, we surrendered ourselves to the police, and after 79 days of occupation, the streets were finally cleared.

The Umbrella Movement of 2014, as this campaign of planned and unplanned protests came to be called, did not meet the tragic fate that

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the Tiananmen Square protests had suffered in 1989. Were lessons drawn from Tiananmen by all, the CCP included? No one was killed in Hong Kong, and there were no more than minor injuries. The Umbrella Movement failed to change the electoral system of Hong Kong, but it reshaped the political culture. People are now much more receptive to civil disobedience as a tool of democratization,<sup>5</sup> and seeds of democracy have been planted in Hong Kong's soil.<sup>6</sup>

Is the pace of events quickening? It took fourteen years after Tiananmen for the July 1 rally to happen, and then eleven years after that for the Umbrella Movement to appear. It seems likely that the fourth landmark event will come before so much time goes by again: There are still many Hong Kong people who, with great resilience of spirit, remain true to their democratic dream. The souls of Tiananmen Square remind them how crucial it is to have a democratic system that can maintain Hong Kong's autonomy and shield it from CCP repression.

Here, however, a caution is in order. The souls of Tiananmen may be strangers to a new generation in Hong Kong. Too young to have witnessed the massacre, some refuse to commemorate June 4, as they feel no emotional bond with the events of 1989. Whereas older Hong Kong democrats tend to see hopes for democracy in Hong Kong as tied to hopes for democracy in China, many younger Hong Kong people reject the linkage. They want to disconnect from China, and they reject the CCP because it is from China. Those who favor self-determination or even full independence for Hong Kong may care little whether China ever becomes democratic. Yet feelings cannot override political reality. If democracy gains no ground in China, the chance that Hong Kong can become democratic will be slim. Emotion aside, strategic reasoning alone should lead people who want democracy for Hong Kong to take an interest in the political life of mainland China.

The CCP seems powerful at the moment, but China is at a crossroads.<sup>7</sup> The kinds of cultural changes seen in Hong Kong may be coming to China before long.<sup>8</sup> When the generation that grew up amid unprecedented economic and physical security becomes the pillar of society, the demand for greater political freedom and more self-rule may become unstoppable.

For democratic change to come to China, the spirit of the Beijing students of 1989 will have to kindle itself anew in the hearts of a generation

that knows the Tiananmen movement as only a tale from history, if at all. The souls of Tiananmen Square might not be remembered by many in mainland China, but they have not left Hong Kong. By virtue of its persistence, Hong Kong's struggle for democracy may have preserved the seeds of change in China. If so, this would not be the first time that Hong Kong has played such a role in Chinese history.<sup>9</sup>

When a substantial number of people in China demand democratic change, it will be a moment of great opportunity for Hong Kong's democracy movement as well. We cannot know when the fourth landmark in our Hong Kong democracy struggle will appear, but we must do everything we can *now* to prepare ourselves so we are ready to rise to the challenge of that moment when it arrives.

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