

Universities in Crisis and Recovery: The Case of Hong Kong, China

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Abstract

Universities moved to the center of the Hong Kong protest movement, while Hong Kong moved into the front line of the US-China trade war. Like other world cities with top-tier universities, Hong Kong has reason to expect that its universities will make a full recovery.

The Hong Kong protest movement of 2019 included eight globally ranked universities, three in the top 100.

Universities have played an important role in social movements around the world. Some became bastions of reform. Some led uprisings. Others were drawn into uprisings that devastated the cities where they were located. Some cities and their universities have come out of it stronger; others lost some vibrancy. Among the earliest were the University of Paris Uprising of 1229 (not to mention the more recent, dramatic unrest of May 1968) and the Beijing May 4th Movement of 1919 led by Peking University and other universities. The University of California at Berkeley's Free Speech Movement in 1964 affected nearby San Francisco, while the Occupy Wall Street movement in New York City pulled in New York University. These flagship universities and their cities remain globally prominent. The Hong Kong protest movement of 2019 included eight globally ranked universities, three in the top 100. Can Hong Kong and its universities recover?

The Confrontation

In 1997, Hong Kong reunited with China after 155 years of British colonial rule and became a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of the People's Republic of China in a "one-country, two-systems" arrangement with a high degree of autonomy for 50 years until 2047. The HKSAR has its own constitution, including freedom of speech and assembly. Its universities have a higher degree of autonomy and academic freedom than its neighbors do.

Tension came to a head on March 29, 2019, when Hong Kong's chief executive published a bill in the legislature that could potentially extradite a person from Hong Kong to stand trial in the Chinese mainland. This brought a million of Hong Kong's seven million people to the street in a peaceful protest. When the chief executive refused to withdraw the bill, two million joined a peaceful protest on June 17. The government stood firm and the anger boiled over. Violent protests, vandalism, and clashes with police engulfed the city. On October 23, the extradition bill was finally withdrawn. By then, the protest movement was in full swing, demanding the resignation of the chief executive, an independent commission of inquiry into alleged police brutality, retraction of the classification of protesters as rioters, an amnesty for arrested protesters, and universal suffrage for the election of the chief executive and the full legislature.

One of the safest cities in the world to study verged on collapse. Most protesters were under 30 years old and concerned about post 2047. The movement had no designated leaders and relied upon social media. Protesters split into 10 or 20 groups and closed highways, mass transit stations, airport check-in counters, and universities. They vandalized hundreds of bank branches, restaurants, supermarkets, shops, and businesses owned by supporters of the government. Despite a million people living below the poverty line, there was no looting. People displayed patience with the disruptions and office workers joined the protests on their lunch breaks. Some decried the vandalism and marched in support of the police.

University campuses became sites of violent confrontation. On one campus, police in body armor fired 1,500 rounds of tear gas and 1,200 rounds of rubber bullets at student and nonstudent protesters. On another campus, thousands of petrol bombs were recovered before being used against police. As universities turned into battlefields, nine university presidents issued a statement calling for the government to resolve the political deadlock, saying that: "... Any demand that the universities can simply fix the problem is disconnected from reality. These complicated and challenging situations neither originate from the universities, nor can they be resolved through university disciplinary processes." University classes were suspended.

The turmoil continued for almost six months, until district council elections on November 24. Over 70 percent of the electorate voted in the biggest landslide in Hong Kong history. Prodemocratic parties won almost 90 percent of 452 seats. The government has yet to address the remaining demands of the protesters.

What Are the Prospects?

The “one-country, two-systems” framework was a stroke of genius, but the future hinges on how it can satisfy the people of Hong Kong and the rest of the country at the same time. The central government views democracy without firm guardrails as a threat to stability. Since 1978, over 5 million Chinese have studied in Western democracies. During that time, China lifted 800 million out of poverty. The leadership weighs Hong Kong’s 7 million against the 1.4 billion in the Mainland and concludes that the greater good means greater control.

While not always receiving an accurate and balanced picture of the views of the Hong Kong citizenry, the Beijing government is aware of the dissatisfaction of students in schools and universities. They attribute the dissatisfaction to a lack of national education as well as unaffordable home prices in a highly unequal society. They criticize Hong Kong’s property tycoons for putting their prosperity above the common good. They believe that the new Greater Bay Area Initiative, which links Hong Kong’s economy and university talent more closely to South China, will attract young Hong Kongers into the nation’s development. (Most students have not shown interest in the initiative or in efforts to introduce a national education curriculum.)

Governance of Hong Kong has become more complex for the world’s second largest economy, especially in the midst of a trade war with the United States. The government asserts that “foreign forces” support the protest movement. Some student protesters carried American flags to their marches and the US Congress enacted the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act on October 15, 2019.

Yet, there are several reasons to expect Hong Kong’s universities to retain their resilience. There is no indication that the government will restrict the freedom of scientists, scholars, and lecturers in Hong Kong’s universities to do their own research, writings, and teaching. The professoriate would be resistant to a loss of academic freedom and the universities’ global rankings would rapidly decline. University senior management has displayed a commitment to dialogue with students. The law ensures that universities have a high degree of institutional autonomy and academic freedom. There is a tradition of reaching out to attract talented students, scientists, and scholars from around the world. The central government is keenly aware of the special character of Hong Kong and its universities—their global outreach and international engagement. It would not want to close that window as it tries to open its own window wider with the Belt and Road Initiative.

Hong Kong and its universities recovered from the uprising of 1967, which left 51 dead and hundreds injured. As New York City’s universities recovered from the anti-war protests that engulfed the city in 1968, Hong Kong universities have the optimism to follow a similar road to resilience and recovery. ▲

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