Hong Kong’s Pro-Democracy Protests

Jennifer Yi

Anderson Fund Report

January 2015
Abstract

For my Politics senior comprehensive project, I will be examining Hong Kong’s pro-democracy protests and how they lead to different types of democracy in the region. More specifically, the project will examine the pro-democracy protests since Hong Kong’s handover back to China in 1997 to the Umbrella Revolution in 2014. Protests that have been occurring since 1997 have been democratic; however, Beijing’s decision to pre-select the next Chief Executive of Hong Kong (announced on August 31, 2014) shows how the protests have had no influence in protecting Hong Kong’s democratic future. Since the protests are the only means in which the Hong Kong people can voice their opinion around their future, it is especially important to examine the recent protests in Hong Kong and how they lead to different types of democracy.
Project Summary

The purpose of my trip to Hong Kong was to interview protesters and learn what democracy means to them. I did not directly ask the subjects for their definition of democracy, but instead asked the following questions:

1. Do you identify as a Hong Kong citizen, Chinese citizen, or both?
2. Have you participated in previous protests?
3. Why did you decide to participate in the Umbrella movement?
4. How confident are you in the effectiveness of the protest?

As it is understood that supporters of the movement are supporters of democracy, question #3 is important in learning what kind of democracy the protesters are looking for. I interviewed 11 protesters of different genders, age groups, and occupations. More specifically, I interviewed 6 male protesters and 5 female protesters. Of the male protesters, 3 are university professors or lecturers, 2 are university students, and 1 is a white-collar worker. Of the female protesters, 2 are recent university graduates now working in their respective fields, 2 are white-collar workers, and 1 is a university student. There was a snowball effect in the way in which I found the interview subjects. I first emailed both U.S. and Hong Kong professors (that I knew from study abroad), Hong Kong students, and friends (from both Hong Kong and the U.S.), asking if they or anyone they know have participated in the recent Umbrella movement and are willing to do an interview. From these emails, I received contact information and more contact information from these secondary contacts.

From my interviews, I learned that the reason for participation varies depending on the individual. However, I was able to categorize the responses under the following reasons: Cultural, Political, and Historical.

Cultural: The term “Mainlandization” was brought up by one of the interviewees, demonstrating the anti-Mainland sentiment that many Hong Kong citizens share. Although Mainland tourists may have helped Hong Kong’s economy, many of the interviewees noted that these tourists are the reasons for the increase in prices for goods and housing, and the decline of Hong Kong local culture. For example, in the hometowns of one of the interviewees, food prices increase on the weekends as that is the time when Mainland tourists visit. Several interviewees also brought up how Mainland tourists urinate and defecate on public streets and in the train station, leaving bad impressions toward Mainland citizens. This anti-Mainland sentiment shows why Hong Kong citizens do not want to identify themselves as Chinese and why they are supportive of the “one country, two systems” policy.

Many interviewees also decided to participate in the protests to support the students who were first stuck inside the Civic Square and who later experienced police violence. I categorize this under cultural as it coincides with Confucian values of collectivity. Many noted that Hong Kong citizens “need” to act together during a time like this. If there is a big enough crowd protesting, the police should not be able to pursue violence against the students.
**Political:** Almost all interviewees decided to participate in the Umbrella movement for “genuine universal suffrage.” One professor explained how Hong Kong citizens feel alienated from the political system as Beijing announced its decision to select the CE candidates for Hong Kong citizens. He stated that the Chinese government itself said at one point that Hong Kong cannot change its system, leaving Hong Kong people with no power. A democratic change is therefore one that is opposing the Chinese government as Beijing is stripping Hong Kong of its democracy. Protesting is important for universal suffrage as it is the “starting point” for Hong Kong people to gather together and speak out. Hong Kong citizens want the CE to reflect the people’s opinions as they would be more willing to listen to the CE and accept the CE’s decisions.

One of the students I interviewed explained how there are so many issues with Hong Kong’s policies that any policy can be a reason “to go to the streets.” The student mentioned the issue with Hong Kong’s Housing Policy as the government recently allowed for people to purchase public housing. This demonstrates how “shortsighted” the government is for younger Hong Kong citizens and why younger citizens are worried about their future. The Hong Kong government already prioritizes Mainlanders when it comes to housing; therefore, it is important that locals have the power to select the next CE candidates.

The protest’s influence on media also serves as a reason why many decided to participate in the movement. There is video footage of police beating Hong Kong students and protesters throughout social media, yet Hong Kong news sources (e.g., television networks and newspapers) do not share this side of the protests. This frustrates many Hong Kong citizens and serves as a reason why some protesters decided to participate in the movement.

**Historical:** The history between China and Hong Kong is important to explain in my comps, especially after having these conversations with the protesters. Even before the handover in 1997, Hong Kong citizens do not trust the Mainland due to events such as the Cultural Revolution in China. It is also important to explain the relationship between Hong Kong and China after 1997 under the “one country, two systems” policy and how Beijing has broken this promise. There are guidelines that exist for universal suffrage under the policy, yet Beijing is trying to redefine this (e.g., “White Paper” that was released last June 2014). The guidelines then set for the 2017 election is what started the student boycott in September 2014. Hong Kong citizens are disappointed in China for not keeping their promise and this is why many decided to join the protests.

The responses to question #4 are also very important to my comps as it helps answer how the protests lead to different types of democracy in Hong Kong. While many are not confident that
Beijing will listen to the protesters’ demands for democracy, all of the interview subjects agree that the protests were still necessary. As the government is ineffective in helping Hong Kong citizens, citizens must voice their opinions through protests. The protests helped raise awareness of different political issues through its forums and public debates. Several interviewees also mentioned how the protests created a public space where citizens can gather and share their ideas in personal ways (e.g. artists as protestors). The creation of public space coincides with the theory of civil society and its importance to democracy, which shows how the protests do lead to a type of democracy in Hong Kong (e.g. an “effective democracy”).