

OCCUPY CENTRAL/SUNFLOWER: POPULAR RESISTANCE IN GREATER CHINA

By Thomas B. Gold



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Since early October, many of us have been mesmerized by scenes of the student-led “Occupy Central” or “Umbrella Movement” demonstrations in the government compound and throughout Hong Kong. Earlier this year, similar events occurred in Taipei in what became known as the Sunflower Movement. Coincidentally, as the Occupy Central movement was getting underway, the University of California at Berkeley celebrated (not just “acknowledged” or “commemorated”) the 50th anniversary of the Free Speech Movement, which rocked the establishment to its core. In all of these cases, the immediate targets were seemingly remote authorities making decisions with no transparency or accountability that directly or indirectly affected the lives of students and many members of the larger society.

But I will argue that this was just the tip of the iceberg of a deeper malaise and concern about the future, both personal and societal. Interestingly and fittingly, the demonstrations in Hong Kong and at an earlier protest in Taipei over the death of a young soldier during military training, adopted a song from the musical *Les Misérables* as their anthem. The original song is a stirring march, “Do You Hear the People Sing?” The point is, this represented a *cri de coeur* of a generation feeling neglected, alienated, disenfranchised, and, to quote the noted symbol of a generation, Benjamin Braddock in *The Graduate*, “a little worried about my future.” Their suppressed voices are now bursting forth in song and street demonstrations: “now do you hear the people singing?”

Having been young myself once, and in college during the 1960s, I know this sentiment is not unusual. But in the recent cases of Taiwan and Hong Kong, it also expresses the deeper frustrations of many citizens who have never been masters of their own destiny; they have always been part of someone else’s agenda and not consulted about, to say nothing of being included in, decisions that have a major short and long-term impact on their fate.

As with anything related to China, to understand the Sunflower Movement and Occupy Central we need first to look at historical precedents. In a culturally Chinese context, there is a sense of a responsibility of intellectuals, including students, to remonstrate with the emperor to let him know, in case he didn't already, that his officials are corrupt, there is popular dissatisfaction, and the dynasty is in trouble. And most likely there will also be natural disasters—always a possibility in Hong Kong and Taiwan, given local climate and geology—to seal the deal that heaven has withdrawn its mandate legitimizing the dynasty.

We can think of the 1898 Hundred Days of Reform, the May 4th Movement of 1919, and Tiananmen of 1989 as examples, the latter two coming after the end of dynastic China but redolent with historical significance. Not surprisingly, the Emperor, or President, or Chairman did not respond well. It ended badly for the students and intellectuals and their supporters in all three cases. But the regime also fell in two of the three cases not long after.

In the recent examples of Taiwan and Hong Kong, the larger issue is the process by which Beijing is inserting itself into the internal affairs of these two societies of Greater China and thereby restructuring them to serve Beijing's overriding interests in rejuvenation and redressing the hundred-plus years of China's humiliation at the hands of Western and Japanese imperialism. That is one of the meanings of realizing what Xi Jinping calls the "Chinese Dream," which ethnic Chinese everywhere, by definition, share in their very DNA.

Let's turn to Taiwan first. I don't have space for a detailed review of Taiwan history. Let's just say that it has never been well and deeply incorporated into the rest of China. It was an outlier and a rambunctious, pestilence-ridden thorn in the side of the Qing dynasty. From 1895 to 1945 it was a colony of Japan. From 1945 to 1949 it was a province of the Republic of China, which was established in 1912 while Taiwan was part of Japan's colonial domain. Since 1949, it has been the seat of the government of the Kuomintang-led Republic of China which retreated from the mainland after losing to the Communists in the civil war that was raging as the ROC was attempting to incorporate the island back into the Chinese fold.

The Kuomintang (KMT) used sticks and carrots to remold the people of Taiwan from their orientation to Japan toward identification with China, a place few of them had visited or knew much about after decades of Japanese efforts remolding the Taiwanese as "the Emperor's people." There was no direct intercourse between the two states or societies on either side of the Taiwan Strait after 1949. "China" was presented as a mystical wonderful place that the people of Taiwan were reengineered to yearn for. "Communist China" was the implacable foe, out to destroy this free "China." The communist regime needed to be vanquished and any contact with it was seditious. Martial Law, in place from 1949 to 1987, reinforced this separation and the KMT's ideology. Taiwan's mission as defined by this émigré regime, was twofold: 1) to revive China's culture and 2) to serve as a non-communist bastion for eventual recovery of the mainland and reunification of all of China as the Republic of China.

We know that two trends were evolving over the course of the Martial Law period. One was a curiosity about the mainland and, after the post-Mao reforms began in the PRC in late in 1978, a desire to do business, tour, and hold family reunions across the Taiwan Strait. The other was the development of a Taiwanese identity derived from China but also strongly influenced by the island's unique historical trajectory of half a century under Japan and then a base for U.S. troops and advisers on the front lines of the Cold War.

What we have seen since the termination of Martial Law in Taiwan has been the rapid development of both of these contradictory trends. In all fields of life in Taiwan there is evidence of Chinese—that is, PRC-based—activity. This can be direct – the movement of people, capital, commodities, services – as well as indirect. By this I mean that consciously or unconsciously, people in Taiwan take the imagined response of the PRC government or people from the mainland into consideration when they make decisions about schooling, residence (including moving off the island), business, vacation, political activity, careers, military service, intellectual inquiry, publications, media and even the name used to refer to the country of their citizenship.

China has been pursuing a more nuanced united front approach to Taiwan even though it keeps over 1000 missiles poised across the Strait just in case things get out of hand from Beijing's perspective. Under the later part of the Lee Teng-Hui and the Chen Shui-bian administrations, there was state-led resistance to China's insertion into Taiwan's daily life and support for the elaboration of a Taiwanese identity. There were concerted efforts to avoid dependence on the Chinese economy and to limit its impact on Taiwan's ability to retain a high degree of autonomy and hard won democratic control over its own fate.

To many people in Taiwan and observers abroad, the current Ma Ying-jeou administration's pursuit of more formal ties with China, such as the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement, is seen as a threat to what little room for maneuver Taiwan still enjoys. Last spring's Sunflower Movement expressed the concern of many young people and their supporters not only that their futures were being increasingly dictated from Beijing but also that their own government was complicit in selling them out by secret "black box" negotiations and deals presented as *faits accomplis*. Prominent among these was the Cross-Strait Trade in Services Agreement, which critics saw as creating new threats of economic vulnerability and which was rushed through the KMT-dominated legislature, sparking the Sunflower Movement and student occupation of the legislature and, briefly, the offices of the executive branch.

Let's turn now to Hong Kong.

Its historical experience has been very different from Taiwan's. It became a British crown colony in 1842 after Qing China's loss in the First Opium War and expanded to its full size under two later nineteenth century treaties that followed other Qing defeats. Hong Kong stood as the preeminent symbol of China's humiliation and weakness as "the sick man of Asia" until July 1, 1997 when it was returned to China, now the People's Republic of China, implementing an agreement made after long negotiations between Beijing and London. The citizens of Hong Kong were not part of the negotiations. Unlike Taiwan (or more formally, the Republic of China) which has its own state apparatus answerable to no higher power and which enjoys some independent international recognition, Hong Kong has *always* been ruled from afar as someone else's property. No outside power can give, sell, or bargain Taiwan away in this manner, although if the U.S. withdrew its ambiguous commitment to defend Taiwan as enshrined in the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act, Taiwan might go to China by default.

I happened to be in Hong Kong conducting research in the summer of 1984 when the negotiations over Hong Kong's future were underway, and the mood was tense and grim. The wealthy, so-called "yacht people," were emigrating in droves to their villas in Vancouver and Australia. (Of course, many of them have since returned as they quite accurately see the Chinese Communist Party as the best friend the capitalist class in Hong Kong ever had, a notion reinforced by Beijing's actions during the Occupy demonstrations when it summoned some of Hong Kong's wealthiest businessmen to Beijing and encouraged them to denounce the demonstrations.)

In 1995, I was invited to Hong Kong as a Sponsored Visitor by the government. I interviewed officials and people in many fields about their sense of Hong Kong post-1997. I came away with two impressions: 1) they were acutely conscious of taking China's possible reaction into consideration as they considered policy; and 2) when I raised the issue of competition from Shanghai, whose extremely ambitious Pudong Development Zone was still in the early stages of construction, they shrugged the idea off, saying, "if Shanghai advances one step, Hong Kong will advance two steps. Hong Kong will always be ahead." Today, taking China's possible reaction into account is an even larger consideration in Hong Kong policy. And confidence in Hong Kong's ability to stay ahead of Shanghai—which enjoys greater favor from Beijing—has waned.

In Hong Kong this October, much like in Taiwan last March, the proximate cause of the demonstrations was opposition and fear that the local elite, in cahoots with Beijing, was negotiating away too much autonomy—in Hong Kong's case the autonomy as encapsulated in the Deng Xiaoping-coined slogan, "one country, two systems" and enshrined in the Basic Law, Hong Kong's constitution.

But the deeper cause of the recent protests lies in concerns that closer integration with China has brought about an overall decline in the quality of life and standard of living among the majority of Hong Kong's population while the super-rich—who rank among the wealthiest people in the world – only get richer, with

Beijing's support and blessing. It is they who Beijing listens to when dealing with Hong Kong, in secretive, non-transparent meetings, disenfranchising the majority. "Universal suffrage" is pretty much a sham in this context. The demonstrators (and many of the "silent majority," I would argue) also worry that their life chances are being drastically and negatively affected by the flood of mainland people and money gobbling up real estate and inflating prices, taking places in universities, getting plum jobs, occupying hospital beds to have babies (who gain a right of abode in Hong Kong), buying up milk powder to take back across the border (to substitute for the possibly poisoned product sold in the mainland), behaving boorishly, and in other ways marginalizing Hong Kong people in their own increasingly not terribly special Special Administrative Region.

The scale and aggressiveness of the demonstrations in Taiwan and Hong Kong apparently caught authorities in Taipei, Hong Kong and Beijing by surprise, even though the Occupy Central with Love and Peace movement already had been a public campaign for some time.

Beijing's initial public response has been predictable: rather than engaging in self-reflection, it blames foreign conspirators. While there is no doubt that foreign NGOs and governments have had some hand in promoting democracy and civil society, some Hong Kong activists have been in close contact with their Sunflower counterparts, and the foreign media has perhaps too enthusiastically made celebrities of Hong Kong's young "democracy activists," the demonstrations are clearly local, indigenous expressions of resistance to Beijing's increasingly aggressive push to assert itself within its own borders and beyond.

The popular actions in Taipei and Hong Kong need to be seen as part of a larger pushback against China's rise, which Beijing can no longer promote as "peaceful" or "harmonious." We see the pushback domestically in Tibet and Xinjiang, and externally in Japan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Myanmar, parts of Africa, even North Korea. Recently several foreign universities have shut down their Confucius Institutes. Beijing's attempt to exert "soft power" is running into a number of unanticipated roadblocks.

I see Beijing's actions not as a show of strength but as an expression of the regime's deep concerns over the risk of widespread popular unrest and its own tenuous legitimacy. Chairman Mao noted that "a single spark can start a prairie fire" and I believe this phrase is very much in the minds of the elite in Zhongnanhai, the central Beijing compound that houses China's top rulers. Their clumsy though, to date, surprisingly successful efforts to control the internet and the flow of information into the mainland about the demonstrations in Taipei and Hong Kong and many other developments elsewhere, also illustrates this fragility and fear. I see them engaged in a game of whack-a-mole where they are trying frantically to smack down a rapidly increasing number of challenges, many of which they have unleashed themselves, and which are becoming linked together.

While the situations in Taipei and Hong Kong have calmed down, at least for now, the underlying causes have not been solved or seriously addressed. If the Chinese Communist leaders were serious about Marx, they would know that changes in material conditions bring about changes in the superstructure—in the realm of values, laws, institutions, and culture. This is even alluded to in the Basic Law, which allows democratization and other reforms when changing local conditions warrant. I think they need to develop safety valves to allow popular frustrations to be expressed and considered, but I acknowledge that I am a Western sociologist and not a Chinese communist, so this way out is perhaps not terribly likely to appeal to China's rulers.

Although Beijing seems unwilling to bend, its intransigence will not end the conflict. We have not seen or heard the last verse of the people singing by a long shot.