Toward a radical Hong Kong imagination

Reflections on nativism in the Tuen Mun Park protests

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> *"The social revolution of the nineteenth century must scoop its poetry not from the past but only from the future. It cannot begin till it has stripped off all superstition from the past. Previous revolutions required recollections of world history in order to dull themselves to their own content. The revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury the dead in order to realise its own content. There phrase transcended content, here content transcends phrase." —Karl Marx, The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*

On July 6—the same week that protesters stormed Hong Kong's Legislative Council—protesters in Tuen Mun, a community near the city's border with Shenzhen, marched on the 31-acre Tuen Mun Park to oppose so-called "dancing aunties": middle-aged women, pejoratively called *damas* (⌧⌧), who blast Mandarin music and perform in designated "self-entertainment zones". Understandable appeals by neighborhood residents to control the loud and abrasive nuisances had gone long unheeded by the Tuen Mun District Council, which prompted the angry crowd to take matters into their own hands.

The protesters seized upon allegations that the aunties were engaging in sex work in the park to justify driving them out; some even barricaded a mainland Chinese woman in a public bathroom and shouted misogynist verbal abuse at her until she had to be escorted to safety by police. Hours after the protest, the Tuen Mun District Council closed the "self-entertainment zone" in question, apparently validating the crowd's tactics.

This gathering was an expression of repressed elements in the Hong Kong protest movement that many have hoped to brush aside as fringe, unimportant (or even acceptable). Almost nobody in the pro-democratic camp has commented on it; in fact, some prominent voices in the movement have tellingly included it within their accounting of the anti-extradition protests.

On the contrary, these elements should be strongly opposed. Building a movement for self-determination on cop, nationalist, and exclusionary logics will not lead to an equal or just society. Hong Kong must imagine a way beyond these given forms and content that lay at its feet. Such an imagination will require critical reflection on the aims and methods of the movement and the Tuen Mun incident should be a moment for just that kind of painful self-appraisal.

1. Don't be a cop

A current of cop logic runs deep in Hong Kong. Policing has always been violent and oppressive here (as it is around the world) but there has been very little critique of police brutality before recent years' protests. In fact, many news headlines this year have bemoaned the "loss of trust" in what was once a "professional and respectable" police force.

The old epithet for the Hong Kong Police Force, "Asia's Finest," has glossed over decades of stigmatizing, surveilling, carding, and questioning ethnic and racial minorities on the street, particularly those from South East Asia, South Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean. Sex workers, queers, and trans folk, too, have long been harassed and abused by the police. Cops in concert with immigration officials have detained, abused, and deported undocumented migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees as well.

While the current popular disdain for the HKPF is inspiring, it is much overdue: the implicit support of policing before 2014, when tear-gas was first used against young protestors, suggests cop logic has long been in play in the wider Hong Kong society. This logic says: it's fine if you police the non-normative, the poor, the queer, the refused—as long as you don't police us.

The Tuen Muen protesters employed this kind of cop logic to harass these women based on their suspected "unacceptable" activities and used physical punishment to compel compliance. They bypassed the rule of law, used threats, misogyny, and violence to exclude these women from "their" neighborhood. These practices followed the logic of police brutality being decried by the protesters in the larger anti-extradition movement. It is "community policing" at its worst.

It is not an excuse that the protesters' voices weren't being heard by their district councilors, it is simple vigilantism to cry: "ethics be damned, we had no choice but to take matters into our own hands!" Protestors should have targeted those in power—the district councilors—rather than their fellow community members. As the nativists themselves would likely argue, people should be afforded due process under Hong Kong Rule of Law. This is the case no matter how uncouth or aggravating the offender.

It is neither possible to argue that the central issue here was a noise complaint. Protest messaging *took as central* the aunties' mainland cultural identity and unfounded allegations of sex work. Protest signs read "Reclaim Tuen Mun," echoing anti-mainlander verbiage used by Hong Kong nativist leader Edward Leung.

Other protest signs focused on the aunties' alleged "adult" content, and employed the image of chickens, the Cantonese slang for female sex workers. This ugly meeting of nativist politics and conservative moralism at the Tuen Mun protest is another powerful argument for the full decriminalization of sex work. If that were to happen, any hypothetical, clandestine "sex work in the park" wouldn't even be an issue because it would be a safe, de-stigmatized, and regulated industry.

2. Nativism is intertwined with aspirations to nationalist liberal democracy

In the grand tradition of liberalism, the political formation of a nation composed of citizens is necessarily based on exclusion. The political theory of liberal democracy is based on the rights of the individual: invariably a private property-owning citizen that is a subject in front of the Law. Anyone who can't fit that profile is excluded from the society's rights, protections, and democratic participation.

This explains why Hong Kong's British colonial regime indefinitely imprisoned Vietnamese refugees in the 1980s and 1990s, trying especially hard to keep them from setting foot on Hong Kong soil. Such anxiety over refugees' physical presence was tied to the fear of their claim to liberal personhood and its attendant rights. By keeping refugees from such rights, the colonial regime could more easily repatriate them to Vietnam, where they faced certain persecution or death.

Unfortunately, this is also the mode of governance to which many of today's protestors aspire. The liberal tradition's "citizenist" logic of domination often plays a central role in the calls to "restore Hong Kong," even as they call for a vague notion of "freedom and democracy." Hong Kong's history, indeed, bears this out. The city's administration, both colonial and as a Special Administrative Region, has *de jure* excluded countless people from accessing the Right of Abode—including the hundreds of thousands of migrant domestic workers who prop up the city's economy—and has *de facto* excluded countless others from social belonging through its own local brand of Han ethno-supremacy.

Proponents of liberalism at large argue that the exclusionary logic that drives liberalism is fundamental to protect the rights of the individual (that is, to own private property) and is thus necessary. The unique form of Hong Kong nationalism in play is a mix of the liberal and revolutionary kind: a defense of existing quasi-democratic Hong Kong elements such as the Basic Law and Rule of Law, as well as the revolutionary refusal of colonial rule, articulated as the refusal of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) authoritarianism. Sadly, for certain segments of Hong Kong protestors, especially the right-wing nativist, independence-leaning parties Youngspiration and Hong Kong Indigenous, the rejection of mainland authoritarian rule has trickled down into the ethno-supremacist rejection of mainland people's social values and cultural identities as supposedly backward, uncouth, and contrary to Hong Kong sophistication, respectability, and cosmopolitanism. This purging of "unpure" elements, such as dancing mainland aunties, is a common function of revolutionary nationalism across many sites and contexts.

I understand that nativism is partially a reaction to the larger fear of cultural colonialism—a real colonial strategy. In this context, the fear is that China is allowing mainland people to stream into Hong Kong in order to dilute and eventually eradicate "Hong Kong culture"—or as one Twitter user angrily told me, force Hongkongers to endure "mainlandised vulgarity."

Ironically, Hong Kong's own brand of ethno-nationalism plays by the CCP's rulebook, whose entire logic of governance rests on the naturalization of the notion that *The Party = The State = The People*. We should know there is no homogenous "Chinese People," just as China does not have to be a one-party state and that these three elements of China do not all directly correspond to one another. To act as such is truly to have our (political) imaginations limited by the CCP. Importantly, it would overlook China's many voices of dissent—including the recent environmental rights protests in Wuhan, JASIC labor rebellion, heavy industry labor revolts, ongoing national liberation struggles in Tibet and Xinjiang, and resurgent Marxist student uprisings.

The Hong Kong nativist logic of equating China's party, state, and people in their protest messaging and tactics only props up the CCP's self-given monolithic status and refuses what could be fruitful cross-border solidarity. The abuse of Mandarin-speaking dancing aunties may have accomplished a small neighborhood goal, but its broader impact is damaging because it feeds the nativist impulse that subtends the broader self-determination movement.

Left unchecked and allowed to continue informing future action, these exclusionary logics will only ever benefit Hong Kong's racial, ethnic, political, and capitalist elite .

3. Re-examining self-determination

To be clear: criticism of pro-democracy advocates does not mean a lack of support for democracy or self-determination. It signals a belief that a pro-democracy self-determination movement needs to achieve its goals in careful and ethical ways. Self-criticism does not "deflate the cause." On the contrary, the cause is only a worthwhile one if it can constantly re-examine its own principles — especially after a moment like the Tuen Mun incident.

I hold a great deal of cautious hope for genuine and just self-determination in Hong Kong. There are many parts of the movement I am enthralled by, and my admiration for the bravery of people on the street facing down a fascist and violent police force is unbounded. My criticism of the ugly elements of the movement only urges its members to be thoughtful, root out prejudice, and refuse an outcome tainted by exclusionary and policing logics.

I won't pretend I have every answer. But to me, one thing is clear: instead of seeking absorption into old and existing political forms, Hong Kong could define its own voice by leading. A creative commitment to, for example, providing universal access to housing and healthcare, ending all policing, and extending the Right of Abode to all, would make this city a true model for the world, and do far more to advocate for Hong Kong's fitness for self-determination than xenophobia and nativism. It could be the foundation of the long-sought after—but always elusive—"Hong Kong culture."

Total decolonization may seem impossible. But much of the change required for decolonization is psychological — as scholars such as Frantz Fanon and Kuan-Hsing Chen have argued — and requires envisioning this time of crisis as an opportunity to break from given forms. Karl Marx wrote that the proletarian social revolution of his times could not begin until it had "stripped off all superstition from the past." The best argument for Hong Kong's self-determination can be found not in a stubborn retrenchment in tradition—but in radically imagining new forms and content for revolutionary action.

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