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Long live anarchy: Hong Kong's first Black Book Fair

Karen Cheung

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"I'm not saying ~~XXX~~ is anarchy utopia, but this kind of grassroots interaction inspires me."

When Ahkok attended London's anarchist book fair last year, he was stunned by the scale of it all: some 60 booths and 50 forums, from heated discussions—one was cut short by a fight—to emotional healing workshops for social activists. There was even a section for kids, because "Why can't there be more play facilities for children at protest sites?"

Ahkok and his friends soon decided that Hong Kong, too, needs an anarchist book fair. This weekend—34 years after London held its first anarchist book fair—their plan will become a reality, in the form of Black Book Fair. (The facilitators chose "Black" instead of "Anarchist" for safety reasons.) The Fair promises artists and activists, zines and poetry, and a special appearance by radical thinker Stevphen Shukaitis. No restrictions on entry, no one to tell you what you can or cannot do—and, Ahkok confesses, "no idea how the police are gonna react." Will it work? We interviewed Ahkok via email to find out.

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Still / Loud: What is anarchy to you? And what does it mean for Hong Kong?

Ahkok: I guess it has to do with my experience in DIY/DIT (do it together) culture in Kwun Tong industrial zone—you know, self-organising, mutual-aiding. We were basically all non-governed autonomists, and we created the biggest indie scene in Hong Kong. In a way, there's an anarchism revival in many countries, including Hong Kong, in which people are extremely disappointed towards centralised government bodies. While most Hong Kong people demand universal suffrage, I'd say it's a good time to ask ourselves: why should we choose someone to govern us? Can we aim for something more liberating?

Why did you choose anarchy (as opposed to other ideologies) to gather people for an exchange of ideas?

It just makes sense to me. Like I said, I experienced it first-hand where I grew up. We created something beautiful because both the government and the super-rich had no idea what to do with those old factory buildings, so it was autonomous during that period of time, before the revitalisation shit struck the place.

And I'm not really "opposing" other ideologies; some of my good friends are social democrats, some are in the Legislative Council. I have massive respect for them, but it's just not me, I don't like to climb into a certain position in order to help others.

Should anarchy be "fun"?

This is a timely question. For me, I'm just happy to participate an event where I can meet my comrades, feel safe, have a laugh, take time off from all the suffocating bullshit. Radical thoughts and knowledge are important, I'm not downplaying that, but I would hope we can all treat each other better, create a better environment of solidarity.

There's a massive fallout from London's Anarchist Book Fair this year—quite an emotional one—and there might not be another book fair next year. I often remind myself, don't pick your enemy, pick your fight, and fight it right. That's pretty much the opposite

of what happened to a few people this year. Some people like to pick on those who are supposed to be on their side, you know? I'm sick of that.

People in Hong Kong may lack reference points when it comes to anarchism. Do you think anarchy is a “western” ideology or concept?

Anarchism to me is about two things: first, being against nationalism. Nationalism is the ugliest shit ever invented. Maybe it's that I grew up as a musician, and we identify ourselves as punks, metal-heads, shoegazers so on and so forth—never “I'm Chinese” or “I'm a Hong Konger”. That's just fucking lame. The only reason why I'm a Hong Konger is that my mum gave birth to me in Hong Kong, that's not even my choice, why should I be proud of something I have no control over? And as a species just how much stupid shit have we done because of nationalism?

More and more people are realising that nationalism only leads to conflicts and war, and elections only lead to disappointments. So, [anarchism] is not only enduring, it's also reviving.

Secondly, I would say anarchism is about trusting humanity. If you think that we are all selfish and evil from birth, then fuck it, we have to be governed. But if you think not, if selfishness and evil are socially conditioned, then perhaps you are an anarchist too. I agree historically and philosophically it's from the west, especially from Spanish and French history, but humanity existed long before we invented the idea of government. I think anarchism is a cosmopolitan ideology in which we all experience a pre-government era.

Would you say anarchism has not yet gained mainstream popularity in Hong Kong?

I have no idea what is the Hong Kong mainstream's choice, to be honest. Fuck mainstream.

What about social movements in Hong Kong? Do any come close to expressing anarchic ideals, e.g. no overarching government, spontaneous organisation, and communal property?

I think [poet and narrator] Uncle Hung said it beautifully. He was walking around through the camps in Admiralty in 2014, and suddenly he realised: “Anarchism is possible! All these tents, how people lived here for 70 days, this is anarchy.”

I often remind myself, don't pick your enemy, pick your fight, and fight it right.

I would say don't look up to leaders, rather, look around you. I remember one day I was having late lunch in a ☒☒, and out of the blue, the boss shouted “☒”, and several people put down their chopsticks, ran out, drove their car around and came back after the traffic warden was gone. I was thinking, as an activist, this kind of grey area is far more interesting than say, legalising parking. I'm not saying ☒☒ is the anarchy utopia, but this kind of grassroots interaction always inspires me, that people can cooperate to work things out. We all have agency.

What is your perspective on whether anarchy can ever be realised?

I'm not a realist, I don't really go around picking something that can be easily realised before my death to believe in. I believe everyone should be able to travel to wherever they want, I believe we should abandon borders. I don't think it'll be realised anytime soon, but that's okay.