INTRODUCTION

On the night of November 17, 2019, the Polytechnic University campus in Hong Kong became a war zone. Heavily armed police encircled the campus. Inside the campus were more than a thousand militant pro-democracy protesters, who used the campus’s access to the cross-harbor tunnel to throw roadblocks and paralyze traffic for more than a week. It was part of the protesters’ efforts to seize control of campuses sitting on strategic chokepoints of the city’s transportation network to halt the city’s activities and put pressure on the government.

According to journalists stationed on the campus, protesters were mostly youngsters in their twenties, with some in their teens. That night, the police issued an ultimatum for occupiers inside to surrender, or they would invade with real bullets. The whole world was watching in real time, anticipating a bloodbath. The police attempted to storm the campus, but it proved futile. First, they tried to use armored and water cannon vehicles to storm through the road leading into the main building, but they were blocked by obstacles that the protesters laid on the road. Then, protesters attacked the vehicles with a hail of firebombs that they made from chemicals seized from the campus laboratories. The armored vehicles were completely destroyed. When squads of police officers tried to storm through the foot entrance, a burning barricade and a barrage of firebombs stopped their advance.

After several failed attempts, the police gave up on storming the campus. They tightened the siege and tried to starve the
protesters into surrender. The next night, tens of thousands of Hong Kong citizens, many of them middle-aged and middle-class citizens, took to the streets near the campus to try to deliver supplies to the campus and break open a path for the besieged protesters to escape. Skirmishes between police and protesters involving barricades and firebombs broke out in several spots throughout the night.

In the chaos of street battles surrounding the campus, a team of motorcyclists managed to rescue a few dozen besieged protesters, who climbed down ropes hanging from a blocked flyover footbridge. Another group of a few dozen protesters broke out by climbing into the underground sewage system and were fetched by vehicles waiting outside. The rescue operation underground was aided by a group of civil engineers who had a copy of the underground sewage system map. They also closely monitored the system’s tidal level to determine when the waterway was open. In the end, only about a hundred protesters remained on the campus. On November 22, nearly a week after the siege began, the last of the protesters surrendered to the police. It was believed that the protesters trapped in the Polytechnic University were among the most militant participants in the movement, with specialists in the making of firebombs and catapults, and the use of archery. The massive rescue efforts throughout the siege showed that these militants commanded broad-based support among Hong Kong citizens.

About a week before the siege of Polytechnic, the campus of the Chinese University of Hong Kong was in a similar situation. On November 11 and 12, protesters occupied a bridge extending from the campus over the Toto Highway. Millions of commuters rely on this route every day, as it connects most of the suburban area in the Eastern New Territories suburbs to downtown Kowloon and the Hong Kong Island. From that bridge, protesters threw furniture and other obstacles to form a barricade and disrupt traffic. Throughout both days, police with full riot gear entered the campus and tried to clear the bridge. A fight broke out with intense exchanges of firebombs, tear gas, and rubber bullets. At the height of the fight on the night of the 12th, the president of the university, a group of administrators, and a group of notable alumni tried to broker a truce between the students and the police. Others flooded in to defend the campus against the police. Unable to break the resistance and retake the bridge, the police retreated before dawn. After
regrouping, the police tried again to storm the occupiers on the 13th. This time, with dwindling numbers, the protesters decided not to defend their position and fled before the police arrived. Many militants who left the Chinese University campus moved on to Polytechnic, and this was how the battle in Polytechnic began.

Beginning in June, the protests were against the government’s attempt to amend a law in Hong Kong that would allow the transfer of suspects allegedly violating mainland Chinese law to be tried in mainland courts. The plan evoked an outcry in Hong Kong and the international community. With the recent cases of cross-border kidnapping of dissident booksellers and Chinese business tycoons at odds with the Chinese government, many feared that the amendment would dissolve the insulation of Hong Kong’s legal system, which has maintained its common-law tradition under the “One Country, Two Systems” arrangement, from the Chinese legal system, which is tightly controlled by the Communist Party. Many perceived the amendment as the last straw of Hong Kong’s local autonomy, which had been eroded for years despite Beijing’s promise to protect it when it took Hong Kong from the British in 1997.

The protest movement started with the peaceful Million March on June 9, followed by a violent clash between protesters and riot police outside the Legislative Council (LegCo) on June 12, when the vote on the law was scheduled in the chamber. The conflict paralyzed the traffic surrounding the Legislative Council. The government called off the meeting and announced it would suspend the vote. The government’s reluctance to withdraw the bill altogether, and the draconian force that the police used against protesters on June 12, motivated the protesters to fight on. Every weekend after the June 12 clash, protests erupted in different parts of the city and grew in size and militancy. Protesters asked for a complete withdrawal of the law and an independent investigation of police violence during the protests. The government’s intransigence and escalation in the use of force by police in dealing with the weekly protests continued to fuel public anger. The protests continued over the summer. Protesters’ tactics escalated from barricades to flying rocks to firebombs, as well as vandalism and arson against symbols of the government and pro-establishment businesses.³

On July 1, during the anniversary of Hong Kong’s sovereignty handover, a group of several hundred protesters successfully broke into
the Legislative Council building. They sprayed the meeting chamber with graffiti and slogans, and defaced the emblem of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR), established on July 1, 1997, when the British handed Hong Kong’s sovereignty to China. They fled before the police arrived. On July 21, protesters encircled the Central Government Liaison Office, the de facto Chinese Communist Party (CCP) headquarters in Hong Kong, and vandalized the national emblem with a dirt bomb at the main entrance. On many other occasions, the national flags in highly symbolic places were pulled down and either burned or thrown into the sea. By the end of the summer, the protesters’ goals had crystallized into the “Five Demands”: full withdrawal of the extradition bill, retraction of the characterization of the June 12 protests as “riots,” release and exoneration of arrested protesters, establishment of an independent commission of inquiry into police violence, and universal suffrage for Hong Kongers to vote for the Legislative Council and the Chief Executive. They declared that they would not yield until all five demands were met.

In the course of the protest, the slogan “Liberate Hong Kong, revolution of our times” (gwong fuk heung gong si doi gak ming), which originated from a pro-independence group whose leaders were either in prison or in exile after an incident of violent conflict with the police in 2016, became the slogan most protesters chanted in nearly all gatherings. The protest song that included the slogan as its main theme, “Glory to Hong Kong,” became a big hit. It was dubbed the “national anthem” of Hong Kong.4 Protesters also consciously drew on slogans from the independence movement in Taiwan and Catalonia to create their versions, like “Hong Kong is not China” (after the slogan “Catalonia is not Spain” in the Catalan independence movement) and “We save our own Hong Kong” (after the slogan “We save our own Taiwan” in Taiwan’s Sunflower movement). The momentum of the protests did not wane even after the government finally yielded and declared a formal withdrawal of the extradition law on September 5. The government still adamantly refused an independent investigation of police brutality.

The Puzzling Broad Social Base of a Radical Uprising

The protesters’ militant actions that defied heavily armed riot police, as well as their overt cry for Hong Kong independence,
surprised many observers of Hong Kong. Ever since the sovereignty handover, Hong Kong had been rife with protests, but the overwhelming majority of these protests had been nonconfrontational and involved no more than peaceful marches or rallies. Very few, if any, of their demands involved anything beyond piecemeal changes. These mild protests fit the cliché image that Hong Kong people are conservative and practical, never venturing too far away from money-making activities. The scenes of fire and blood on university campuses as was witnessed at Polytechnic and Chinese Universities in November 2019 was not something most Hong Kongers had ever seen or expected to see in Hong Kong.

Yet the most surprising part about the 2019 protests, especially for the authorities, was that, despite the militancy and radical consciousness it manifested, the movement garnered solid support from the wider population. The demographic of protesters, reflected in those arrested, was mostly young students, but there were also professionals, including medical doctors, airline pilots, accountants, artists, and older middle-class professionals caught in action on the front line. Since its inception, the Chinese University of Hong Kong’s School of Journalism and other organizations have conducted regular polling to gauge public opinion of the protests. It found that even after a long summer of turmoil, most of Hong Kong’s population still supported the protesters. They blamed the government for the escalation of conflict.

The broad support of the protesters was once again confirmed in the district council election on November 24, just a few days after the university battle ended. This grassroots election has always been about mundane neighborhood issues like road construction projects and sewage maintenance. Pro-government candidates always won the majority of the seats through its patron–client networks in the neighborhood. But in the 2019 election, democratic candidates, including many newbies explicitly supportive of the protest, won a landslide victory that the HKSAR had never seen before. This caught Beijing by surprise, as it had been waiting for the “silent majority” to tire of the protests and deal a blow to the increasingly radical opposition in the election.

Resistance to the extradition bill and widespread sympathy for the resulting movement are not limited to ordinary citizens, but also quite explicit among the conservative business elite of the city.
Even before the resistance gathered momentum, Joseph Lau Luen Hung, a real-estate billionaire, filed a judicial review against the extradition law and spearheaded the elite’s opposition to the law. Afterward, a handful of influential Beijing allies, including Charles Ho Tsu-kwok, a second-generation tycoon and a member of the National Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, also spoke out against the extradition law. He remarked on March 26, 2019, in his speech at an elite business social event, that many of his friends “were afraid of being arrested and transferred [to the mainland],” and that the extradition amendment would severely damage Hong Kong’s common-law practice, which is “the most essential [aspect of] the One Country, Two Systems” and “Hong Kong’s business environment.”

Many other pro-Beijing representatives of business associations and political groups also expressed their opposition or doubt about the amendment.

When the protests were in full force during the summer, Beijing tried to mobilize its wealthy elite allies to denounce the protesters and express support for the government’s efforts to restore law and order, as it has always done. But the response was lukewarm. Li Ka-shing, the richest man in Hong Kong and Asia for many years, and Beijing’s long-term ally in securing Hong Kong’s smooth transition from British to Chinese rule, published a full front-page ad in various newspapers – according to most interpretations, it denounced violence on both sides, not only the protesters but also the police. He was later criticized openly by the official Chinese media for being suspiciously unenthusiastic in denouncing the protesters. A wide range of establishment business and professional elites stepped forward to call for further government compromise, such as establishing an independent inquiry commission into the police violence, as the only way to quell the unrest. They appeared to put more blame on the government than on the protesters for perpetuating the unrest.

More surprisingly, even some mainland Chinese tycoons in Hong Kong were against the extradition law. In late May, on the eve of the eruption of protest, a group of wealthy, powerful elites from mainland China with residency in Hong Kong joined a dinner party with Hong Kong’s chief executive, Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor. At the dinner, they lobbied Lam for scrapping the legislation and expressed their worry about the law. The fear of being extradited
to mainland China concerned not only democratic activists but also many businesspeople. Likewise, most business organizations representing foreign business interests in Hong Kong, including the American Chamber of Commerce in Hong Kong and the International Chamber of Commerce–Hong Kong, spoke out against the law.

This massive mobilization across the population of Hong Kong against the law, coupled with the apparent sympathy and neutrality of the establishment elite, would have been unthinkable in the HKSAR’s early days. Radical, confrontational activists had been a minority in Hong Kong’s opposition movement, which had always been dominated by moderates who sought dialog and compromise with Beijing. For years, most Hong Kongers had been known for their conservatism and pragmatism, if not apathy toward politics. One has to ask: what happened to Hong Kong since the sovereignty handover that made this massive mobilization of society in defiance of Beijing possible? Why did even the business elite, whose alliance with Beijing brought them huge privileges and benefits, become hesitant to support the Hong Kong government and Beijing during the unrest?

Besides the changes within Hong Kong, we also need to ask what changes occurred in the geopolitical and global economic environments of Hong Kong that helped make the 2019 movement possible. One key feature of the 2019 protest movement is that protesters consciously developed an international front that joined hands with the Hong Kong diaspora to lobby parliaments and governments worldwide, most of all in the UK and the US, to support the movement. This international lobbying contributed to the passage of the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act in the US Congress in November 2019. The international attention centered on Hong Kong as one of the most contentious issues that intensified confrontation in US–China relations.

With the heavy-handed imposition of the National Security Law from Beijing on Hong Kong in July 2020 and the widespread arrests that followed, the earthquake that shocked Hong Kong in 2019 seems to have subsided. But resistance elsewhere, as with the aftermath of Hong Kong’s 2014 Umbrella Movement, clearly shows that such tranquility could only be temporary. Tensions along the fault line continued to grow, and another tremor in the future is...
certain. Underlying the 2019 movement is a major tectonic shift in local society and the global political economy. To discern the scale and dynamics of that tectonic shift, we have to consult and move beyond the existing studies of the colonial and post-handover development of Hong Kong.

**Perspectives on a City That Refuses to Die**

In 1968, the British writer Richard Hughes published *Borrowed Place, Borrowed Time*, in which he characterized Hong Kong:

[a] borrowed place living on borrowed time, Hong Kong is an impudent capitalist survival on China’s communist derrière … There is work and profit today. There will be work, and there may be profit, tomorrow – if tomorrow is allowed to come. That is Hong Kong’s credo.\(^{15}\)

To Hughes, the whole existence of Hong Kong as a free-as-the-Wild-West city was transient. It was destined to die at some point and be absorbed into China. Everything was temporary. This notion of “borrowed place, borrowed time” became a dominant theme, even a cliché, in the discussion of Hong Kong in literature, culture, and academic studies. This notion of “borrowed place, borrowed time” does capture the reality of Hong Kong before the 1997 handover. Some would argue that the “One Country, Two Systems” that Beijing promised Hong Kong after the handover was an extension of this transient state of Hong Kong’s existence.\(^{16}\)

After the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the British were well aware that the city was indefensible if Beijing decided to invade. Politically, the continuation of British colonial rule was at the mercy of Beijing and could end at any time. It rang ever truer amidst the waves of decolonization in other parts of the British Empire. The democratic movement in Hong Kong also accepted Hong Kong’s existence as an entity separate from China as temporary. It saw Hong Kong’s democratization as part of China’s larger democratic movement in the tradition of the May 4 student movement in 1919 and the Tiananmen movement in 1989. The democratization of Hong Kong was not significant in its own right. Instead, many saw and continue to see it as little more than the
Chinese democratic movement temporarily in exile in Hong Kong as an offshore space. Many activists in the movement believe that “One Country, Two Systems” would not be necessary if China became democratic. They dream that Hong Kong’s democratization will pioneer the democratization of China at large. For them, the Hong Kong democratic movement’s ultimate goal is Hong Kong’s absorption into a democratic China.

Economically, Hong Kong’s prosperity has historically hinged on China’s exclusion from the world economy. Hong Kong has been a gateway or a proxy for China into international markets. The rise of Hong Kong as an industrial powerhouse in the 1950s through the 1970s was fueled by Chinese capitalists and working-class migrants who fled mainland China after the Communist takeover. The rise of Hong Kong as a trading and financial center connecting China and the world after the 1970s was also based on China’s closure from free trade and capital flows. It is often assumed that these economic functions of Hong Kong would dissipate as China continued opening up.

Students of Hong Kong culture notice that hybridity is a defining characteristic of Hong Kong identity. Hong Kong has been a capital of China’s diaspora worldwide, with high concentrations of cultural institutions and influences from the US, the UK, and other Western countries. Hong Kong saw the coexistence of various discourses of Chinese nationalism, first from Taiwan’s Nationalist Party (Kuomintang, KMT) and then from the CCP. Some characterize Hong Kong culture as a “cultural supermarket” or “kaleidoscope” consisting of a plurality of cultural idioms from which Hong Kong dwellers choose to assemble their own hybrid identities. Whether and how this “cultural supermarket” or “kaleidoscope” of Hong Kong identity will perpetuate itself or be absorbed by a singular Chinese nationalist identity emanating from Beijing has been a point of contention.

The signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984 and the finalization of the Basic Law, the mini-constitution governing post-handover Hong Kong, in 1990 warranted the continuation of Hong Kong’s pre-existing politico-legal system, economic institutions, and the so-called “Hong Kong way of life” beyond 1997 for at least another five decades. Despite that, the notion that Hong Kong was dying was so prominent that cultural studies scholar Ackbar Abbas asserted on the eve of the handover that the cultural politics of
Hong Kong was a “politics of disappearance.” Journalistic coverage of Hong Kong around the handover did not shy away from predicting the “death of Hong Kong.” The common perception was that Hong Kong was gradually dissipating, on its way to being absorbed into the fabric of the Chinese state, the Chinese economy, and the Chinese identity. This perception was reinforced in many official Chinese publications on Hong Kong. They uniformly saw Hong Kong’s development, after deviating from the main current of the Chinese nation-state’s development because of British colonial rule, finally returned to the main current after 1997. Hong Kong became an organic part of the “great revival of the Chinese nation.”

A casual search of English-language academic publications on Hong Kong shows that after a peak in publications in the wake of the sovereignty handover, there was a respite. During that peak, most publications look back on Hong Kong’s colonial past as if they were elegiac, concluding a bygone era. The number of English-language publications on Hong Kong declined right after the year 2000. Among the post-handover publications, many are about Hong Kong’s new role in the context of the economic rise of China, how Hong Kong was overshadowed by other Chinese global cities like Shanghai, the merging of Hong Kong with the great Pearl river delta economy, and so on.

On the other hand, the literature on the political and cultural development of Hong Kong after 1997 started to notice the resilience of Hong Kong politics and society. An increasing number of works on Hong Kong politics saw the intensifying struggle between the democratic movement, which was striving to actualize universal suffrage in the local legislature and the chief executive, as promised in the Basic Law, and Beijing’s attempt to tighten its political control of the city by denying genuine universal suffrage to the city. Despite increasing political control by Beijing, Hong Kong’s democratic movement did not fade away. Instead, it became ever more lively with the injection of a new wave of social movements.

This new wave of movements, to be sure, is in part a continuation of the traditional social movements connected to the broader quest for Chinese democratization. The annual June 4 vigil in commemoration of the 1989 massacre, protests that asked for the release of Liu Xiaobo, protests against human rights abuse during the Olympic torch relay in Hong Kong in 2008, and others were