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Book reviews

# Hong Kong in revolt and The Art of Rebellion

- Reviews section -

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**Au Loong-Yu**, *Hong Kong in revolt: the protest movement and the future of China* (London: Pluto Press, 2020) 198pp, Â£16.99

Ben Hiller and Viktoria Ivanova, *The Art of Rebellion: dispatches from Hong Kong* (Melbourne: Spark Publishing, 2020), 238pp, Â£16.47 (Available from Book Depository)

The last couple of months have seen quite a few books about the 2019 revolt in Hong Kong published, but for socialists these are the most valuable of the current crop. Au Loong Yu is a veteran Hong Kong socialist, who took an active part in the movement and tried to influence its direction, so his book is both an evocative account of how it unfolded and a sharp analysis of its strengths and weaknesses. He has a good eye for telling details as well, my favourite being the health workers who showed their support by refusing to allow the police to sit down in hospitals!

His starting point is that this was essentially a generational revolt of those born after Hong Kong's reversion to China in 1997, the '1997 generation', and uses both polling and arrest data to show that they were the most heavily involved in both the mass demonstrations and the frequent confrontations with the police. He argues that:

The 1997 generation is an angry generation, because they were lied to, the promises made to them were not honoured, and when they asked questions, they were teargassed. It is a desperate generation, because they witnessed catastrophe after catastrophe, yet their calls for action were largely ignored by their parents until very late. (pp. 44-45)

The book starts with the 'umbrella movement' of 2015, which prefigured 2019 in many ways, but ended in defeat, though it was clear that the government had won the battle but not the argument. 2019 brought back onto the streets the majority of those who had been active in 2015, as well as many more who had not.

The bulk of the book is split into chapters on Actors, Events, and Issues, but in practice the three strands are interwoven throughout the narrative. Actors begins with explaining the different political tendencies within the movement, in particular the anti-China 'localists', but also focuses on the key part played by workers and the spread of union organisation. The author also stresses the involvement of both mainland Chinese and migrant workers from South and East Asia, noting in particular that a telephone poll of people born outside Hong Kong found that one in five had joined one or more protests.

The chapter titled Events makes it clear that this was something more complicated than a movement that rose and then fell, and the author charts the peaks and troughs critically, identifying in particular the participation in the strikes that were called as one of the factors that set the movement back. This wasn't simply because of the cross-class nature of the movement, but crucially because a number of employers reacted by victimizing movement activists, and got away with it.

The Issues chapter takes up both issues of internal organisation, and the thorny questions of pro-Western sentiment and supposed Western support for the movement. The paradox was that a movement for greater democracy lacked internal democracy, with no clear mechanism for deciding on strategy and tactics. Social media meant that tens of thousands of people could be involved in planning individual events, deciding on slogans and pulling off marvels of

logistics but, without a clear direction, there was a constant pull towards the most militant or extreme action, not always the best option to strengthen or extend the movement.

For many socialists in the West the (minimal) presence of US and British flags, as well as the rhetoric of Western governments, meant that they viewed the movement with suspicion. The author is very sharp about why this is wrong, explaining the roots of pro-Western sentiment in Hong Kong as well as its contradictions, and insisting that the movement had to be seen as a site of political argument - for socialists to stand aside would only have strengthened other forces.

But he is also very hard on identifying the movement's main enemy:

The US no longer has armies stationed in Taiwan, and Hong Kong's handover to China was completed in 1997. We must treat the US and the UK's rhetoric about supporting Hong Kong and Taiwanese democracy with a dose of scepticism, and their agenda with suspicion, but they are no longer our direct oppressors. (p. 168)

Here as at other points I could have done with more detail and a longer exposition of the argument. The author is clearly writing for as wide an audience as possible in both Hong Kong and internationally, and trying to cover all aspects of a particularly complex movement, which at times prioritises breadth over depth. Still, when the biggest criticism of a book is that it's too short, that's a pretty strong recommendation.

The movement subsided this year due to the combined effects of repression and the Covid-19 pandemic, though, as the author notes, China's initial mishandling of the Covid-19 crisis has only deepened antagonism in Hong Kong. Recent mobilisations have shown that the movement hasn't come to a complete halt, although the numbers involved are much smaller. The overall message is that neither side won, and that none of the underlying issues that caused the explosion have been resolved.

*The Art of Rebellion* is a very different book, though written from the same political standpoint and underscoring many of the points made by Au Loong-Yu. It's a mix of reports written from two visits to Hong Kong by Australian socialist journalist Ben Hillier, and a dazzling display of posters, leaflets, photographs and other images beautifully curated by Viktoria Ivanova. Hillier's articles have the power and immediacy of committed journalism:

For the fourth night in a row there are protests in town. I wave down the first scooter to come past. 'Can you take me to Mong Kok?' Such is the support for the movement that nothing else needs to be said. He pulls out a helmet and we're off at a cracking pace. The streets are again occupied, bricks again litter the place and the barricades are up at Nathan and Mong Kok roads. There are no police, but they were here earlier. In the middle of the intersection, frontliners make more Molotovs. Someone stuffs it up and the road is on fire. The culprit pretends to have done it on purpose and rubs his hands above the flames as though he is just trying to warm up on this balmy night. Everyone finds this very funny. (pp. 112 and 115)

But the visual side, which makes up about half the book, is equally compelling, giving a powerful sense of the movement's roots, determination, imagination and energy (more of the artwork can be seen [here](#)). The combination of the two make this a wonderful account of and tribute to the movement - for a small socialist publishing house, it's a production of exceptional quality. If you are just going to read one book on the 2019 movement, it has to be *Hong*

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*Kong in Revolt*. But if that whets your appetite for more, *The Art of Rebellion* is both a visual treat and full of insights into one of the 21st centuries most important rebellions to date. Both books work as excellent records of the movement's history, but more importantly, powerful resources for the next time.

Source [rs21](#).

PS:

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