

## Reorienting Hong Kong's Resistance

“A rare and revealing anthology of leftist, decolonial and internationalist ideas rooted in the Hong Kong experience. These thought-provoking, praxis-based critical voices intimate political possibilities that are particularly necessary in these very dark times.”

—Ching Kwan Lee, *Professor of Sociology, University of California, Los Angeles*

“This groundbreaking book gives shape to a new form of politics that the authors call the ‘decolonial left.’ The decolonial left defines itself against the New Cold War rivalries, legacies of British colonialism, Chinese authoritarianism, and all forms of class, race, and gender oppression, to articulate a politics of protesting and living in the space of global abolitionism and internationalism from below. Hong Kong therefore becomes a paradigmatic space for theorizing a universal politics of the decolonial left while showcasing how it is done in practice. I recommend this book to anyone interested in radical politics and social movements beyond the binarisms that have hindered decolonization everywhere.”

—Shu-mei Shih, *Edward W. Said Professor of Comparative Literature, University of California, Los Angeles*

“Hong Kong’s pro-democracy movement is abhorred and adored in unexpected ways: While Western leftists denounce it as a CIA-instigated revolt against a supposedly Communist fatherland, libertarians idolize it as the defense of a free-market paragon. This volume dispels such mythologizing by offering a fresh look through progressive internationalism. As the city’s struggle has entered a new phase under draconian repression, commentaries and critiques from leftist perspectives provide the needed intellectual resources for future engagement.”

—Ho Ming-sho, *Professor of Sociology, National Taiwan University*

“It is always difficult to explain what progressive politics are in Hong Kong. This collection of essays makes an innovative breakthrough in bringing together engaging analyses of the city from broadly defined ‘leftist’, de-colonial and internationalist perspectives. Their viewpoints are provocative, sincere and make not only a timely contribution to Hong Kong Studies but also thoughtful challenges to all those who are concerned about Hong Kong.”

—Dr. Law Wing Sang, *Independent Researcher in Exile*

“Considering the fact that many Hongkongers indulge in the fantasy of an ‘endgame,’ it is timely now to regain the courage and critical vision for democratic struggle. As the city turns a new page in its resistance to authoritarianism, reinterpreting local experiences from diverse leftist perspectives is a new mission for Hong Kong’s progressive movement—proof that it’s too early to say game over. This book will definitely inspire a generation of new radical intellectuals.”

—Ip Iam-chong, *Adjunct Assistant Professor of Cultural Studies of Cultural and Religious Studies, The Chinese University of Hong Kong*

“Grounded in the exigent particulars of Hong Kong’s history at the convergence of empires yet fiercely committed to the possibility of other futures, this collection makes vital contributions to leftist traditions of anticolonial and decolonial thought. The essays here think with people’s everyday practices under conditions of political, economic, and viral duress in rigorously hopeful ways. Modeling the trans-scalar, cross-border work required for this moment, *Reorienting Hong Kong’s Resistance* is welcome fuel for the struggle.”

—Nadine Attewell, *Associate Professor of Gender, Sexuality, and Women’s Studies & Global Asia, Simon Fraser University*

Wen Liu · JN Chien · Christina Chung ·  
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Editors

# Reorienting Hong Kong's Resistance

Leftism, Decoloniality, and Internationalism

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## FOREWORD

In response to criticisms raised about Beijing's treatment of Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and Taiwan at the June 2021 G7 Summit held in Cornwall, UK, the Embassy of China in London hit back with these remarks:

For 150-plus years under colonial rule, Hong Kong residents had been a target of oppression by the British government, with no democracy or human rights to speak of. Had the US or others paid any attention to Hong Kong's human rights and democracy back then?

The next day, a group of Hong Kong nativists published a response that included a long narrative about how British colonialism has contributed to Hong Kong's modernization and progress (Pazu 2021).

I lived under British colonial rule for 41 years. Indeed, as far as I can remember, we as Hong Kong Chinese were oppressed by the British government and had minimal liberties, and the US never bothered to pay attention. This is one of the reasons why I found it distasteful that protestors waved the Union Jack at the protests that began in 2019. For most newly politicized young protestors it was understandable—they had never experienced life under colonial repression like I had. For this minority of organized pro-Western actors who promoted colonial nostalgia, it was a conscious choice to whip up support for Trump. But compared to the two million people who came out to protest on the streets, those waving British or US flags were still a small minority. Equally true, however, was that people in the movement have generally tolerated

them despite private disagreements, which has only helped to magnify the latter's force (Chen 2021).

In other words, the story and future of a decolonial left praxis for Hong Kong, as this collection begins to consolidate and imagine, must begin with a clear and honest understanding of why such a political vision has always been marginalized by political actors that are nostalgic for Western colonial legacies.

The right-wing pro-Western forces in Hong Kong became more vocal in the later stages of the British colonial era. This contingent first widened its support beyond what was called the “high-class Chinese” (高等華人 *goudang wayan*) in the 1970s, with the inclusion of the rising middle class in the midst of a long economic boom. The early liberal pan-democrats emerged from this particular ethnic and class group. These figures were the first to develop strong links to the British and US foreign policy establishments. With the rise of localism in the early 2010s and its continued presence into the 2019 uprising, a vocal nativist current, in particular, has helped to strengthen these connections, especially with the international right-wing.

In reality, the broadening of these pro-colonial forces was more a result of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s mismanagement than it was due to their own organizing merits. Hong Kong has always been a safe haven for mainland Chinese people, be it due to economic scarcity or political persecution. The people in Hong Kong at the time, who received mainland refugees, were fully aware of the meaningless sacrifices that were made in the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. In other words, the largest and most definitive wave of immigration in the city's history was inseparable from Hong Kong's complex experience of alienation from the regime in Beijing. As time went by, even many pro-CCP locals became deeply disillusioned. With every wave of migration, a new generation of people in Hong Kong experienced an ever-deepening disappointment in the prospect of democratic reforms on the mainland.

Another factor that contributed toward the pro-colonial, right-leaning developments in Hong Kong was the city's prosperity, which made the contrast between a “backward mainland China” and a “thriving free market” metropolis even more visible. Despite mainland China's change to CCP rule in 1949, Beijing was nevertheless eager to maintain Hong Kong's colonial status until 1997 for its own benefit, primarily for tapping into the city's foreign currency resources (Goodstadt 2007). These two factors made it easy for many to characterize Hong Kong as the rare

example of a “successful colony” with “happy colonial subjects.” An important consequence of this colonial civic characterization is that Hong Kong never had a locally born mass movement for decolonization after the Second World War, when a great decolonization wave was sweeping across the globe.

While the Deng Xiaoping era of the 1980s and 1990s brought material improvements to many mainland Chinese, Beijing continued to disappoint the observers at its doorstep—the Hong Kong people—at this crucial time. Energized by discourses of sovereignty, democratic rights, and other important aspects of the city’s future, “Hongkonger” began to consolidate as a political identity during the Sino-British negotiations in the 1980s through to the Handover in 1997. But Hongkongers’ hopes for political democratization were staunchly opposed by Beijing’s subsidiary groups, which were supported by the city’s economic elites against the wishes of various civil society organizations and coalitions. Two years after the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre, when the British government introduced partial elections to the legislature for the first time in its 150-year occupation of the island, the CCP-aligned Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions (HKFTU) launched a countercampaign under the slogan: “Yes to rice coupons! No to ballots!” (要飯票不要選票) (Sun Miu 1987).

We should treat with skepticism both the colonial government’s electoral reforms and the HKFTU’s campaigns, but the latter’s slogan revealed a particular logic about how the CCP imagined its political program as well as Hongkongers’ own political limitations: That the right to better material conditions should remain separate from the right to political democracy. Yet the city’s small radical left contingent, which I was part of, believed that Hongkongers should have called for universal suffrage, since the British plan for electoral reform was inadequate. But the HKFTU, or its master, the CCP, has always been hostile to genuine universal suffrage. Today, the HKFTU still claims to be the faithful successor of the great 1926–1927 Canton-Hong Kong general strike (HKFTU 2020), but one of the central demands of the strike committee at the time was nothing less than universal suffrage for Hong Kong. Yet the HKFTU, this self-proclaimed successor of the great strike, has campaigned *against* universal suffrage while millions of Hongkongers were demanding it, echoing the 1920s strikers.

It is the increasing authoritarianism of Beijing that makes British colonialism appear to be a lesser evil, and it is this appearance, along with

pro-Western propaganda, that established the foundation for the rise of nativism for many of today's newly radicalized youth. Since the Handover in 1997, Beijing has continuously tried to impose its autocratic rule over the people of Hong Kong, driving successive waves of resistance that have increased in radical measures. With the absence of a genuinely democratic and grassroots decolonization movement, however, these waves of resistance were and will always be limited.

With the premature death of Hong Kong's autonomy in 2020, this nostalgia for British colonial rule may grow even deeper. Hong Kong's upper-middle class, with support from select tycoons, has successfully appropriated local knowledge to align their own agendas with the Western establishment in exchange for Western support against Beijing. In the absence of universal suffrage, rather than looking to local elites and tycoons in the hopes that they might use their power to bring about favorable change, we can and must begin to pursue a different political horizon in this new era of repression. At the same time, we also must not pin our hopes on false saviors from the outside; Hong Kong's working-class masses must believe in their own strength and build their own independent organizations democratically to resist autocratic rule.

Instead of identifying with Western institutions and its "lesser evils," we must focus on local communities as well as our communities in exile to dismantle the longstanding infrastructures of colonialism in Hong Kong. We must remember that Hong Kong's present oppressions were determined for us by the British government's conscious choice to keep us powerless and disenfranchised, as they negotiated with Beijing about our interests and future in the years before the handover. The "smooth transition" to CCP rule, endorsed by political and economic elites on all sides, was premised on the demobilization of grassroots organizing, and the rejection of democratic organizations that emerged from it. These organizations were the only way to effectively replace Hong Kong's colonial machinery and resist the local bourgeoisie who had sought to adopt the instruments of colonial oppression for their own benefit.

Although pro-Western nativists appeared to be the most vocal during the 2019 uprising, they were never the sole voice of Hong Kong's struggle for democracy. There was always a marginal but critical leftist current in this city, even prior to 1949; these voices were not only critical of the British colonial government, but also of Beijing's official "communism." Even though this Trotskyist current remained underground to avoid the British colonial government's persecution, many



were still arrested and deported from Hong Kong. Subsequently, two important waves of leftists emerged around the 1970-80s and then in 2005–2014. The earlier 1970s–80s wave was composed of anarchists and socialists coming out of mass campaigns like the anti-imperialist Baodiao movement and the Chinese language movement (Law 2009; Li 2020). This group of leftists operated with clearer objectives and demands than those that came before. Namely, they put forward demands for complete self-determination for the Hong Kong people; to end colonial rule and all of its vestiges; to enact radical economic redistribution through democratic institutions; and to connect Hong Kong’s democratic struggle with the related movement developing in the mainland. In other words, these demands and ideas emerged long before radical Democrats proposed them in the post-Umbrella Movement era. The more recent wave of leftists that emerged circa 2005 enjoyed a slightly broader base of support than their predecessor, but these leftists were much less defined in their objectives, organizations, and political direction as a result. This partially explains their ineffectiveness in answering challenges posed by the nativists. Though quickly sidelined after repeated attacks from nativists, the most recent, the fragmented voices of the post-2005 leftists were still heard during and after the 2019 protests. Any possibility of a democratic left for Hong Kong must take these histories and movement lessons into account.

This leads us back to this book—a collection of decolonial and leftist essays written in the midst of the momentous 2019 uprising. It is a timely book that represents an important attempt to carry forward and build on the legacy of past lessons and present struggles of the Hong Kong left. With the government’s clampdown on the protests, it is even clearer now how faulty nativist strategies and discourses were: from “China will soon explode” (支爆) “President Trump Save Hong Kong,” to the *laam chau* (攪炒) scorched-earth strategy—none of these appear now to be true or sensible. This book provides us insight into the highly contradictory and complicated realities of the 2019–2020 protests, which is essential for understanding and learning from the movement. Contrary to the nativists’ smear campaign against the left that has characterized it as being “off the ground,” (離地) the first section of the book “Grounding the Movement” begins by synthesizing the “on the ground” experience and history of Hong Kong’s contemporary resistance movements to develop an invaluable and timely political analysis. The second section “Material Life” moves us beyond the conventional and binary readings of Hong Kong

politics to grasp how new understandings of mass power have emerged from different arenas of grassroots, local struggles. The third section “Internationalism from Below” relates Hong Kong’s struggle to larger geopolitical forces and other grassroots milieus around the world, toward developing a new internationalist vision. This means focusing on the local and identifying its connections with the transnational, which involves a multitude of approaches: from examining the conditions faced by the city’s hundreds of thousands of Southeast Asian migrant workers, to articulating the interconnectedness of the Philippines and Hong Kong’s economic foundations, or developing a comparative analysis of policing in Hong Kong and the US.

Taking an assertive stance in fighting for Hong Kong’s identity and autonomy means that we must imagine beyond the limits of the pro-Western politics of both right-wing nativists and the liberal pan-democrats. The renewed Black Lives Matter movement of 2020, along with other recent popular mass struggles, reminds us again that there are always multiple democratic alternatives to the faux-democracy of Western regimes like the US, and anti-colonialism is precisely one of these alternatives. The nativists, while condemning Black Lives Matter movements and enthusiastically supporting Trump, are aligning themselves with centuries of atrocities, exploitation, slavery, war against the people, and denial of national self-esteem and identity. These structures of oppression are the exact opposite of what millions of working Hongkongers aspire toward and continue to fight for. To resist all forms of colonialism is no luxury, but a long overdue necessity, as Hongkongers are silenced on the ground or again scattered across the diaspora in what is our darkest era of political persecution yet. As the texts in this volume remind us, an open, democratic, and internationalist Hong Kong identity is possible and needed now, more than ever.

I would like to thank Promise Li for his helpful advice and input in writing this foreword.

Cornwall, UK

Au Loong-Yu

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**Au Loong-Yu** is an activist and writer who has been active in Hong Kong social movements since his youth in the 1970s. He is a co-founder of Globalization Monitor, an organization committed to supporting mainland Chinese labor actions. After leaving the organization a decade ago, he devoted his time to writing. His most recent book is *Hong Kong in Revolt*, published in 2020 by Pluto Press.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As writers and editors, we do all of our work in community. Our work builds upon the radical and inspirational ideas of community, liberation, self-determination, and democratic process that come from thought put into action among the local milieu of Hong Kong activists, organizers, and scholars. We draw on that collective work in our concept of the decolonial left in Hong Kong—as a nascent and prefigurative mode of thinking and acting—and have a number of people and organization to thank as a result.

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will lead to many others that can encapsulate an even broader range of voices and continue to explore these lines of thought.

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## INTRODUCTION: LOCATING THE DECOLONIAL LEFT

Decolonial and leftist perspectives on Hong Kong, though important, have largely been sidelined or unidentified in the city's recent struggles for democracy and self-determination. These struggles have produced far-ranging international reverberations. Although discourses and practices that have emerged, such as labor union organizing and boycotting, may not explicitly operate under the banners of leftism or decoloniality in Hong Kong, examining them under these frameworks can offer significant historical, transnational, and prefigurative sight lines with which to contextualize and interpret their impacts. This book proposes the following: that Hong Kong has a marginal but long-standing decolonial and leftist tradition of its own; that leftist and decolonial ideologies are often expressed indirectly through the prefigurative politics of living and protesting in Hong Kong; and that the city's position as a nexus of transnational capital transfer as well as the interconnectedness of its struggles with other global locations indicates a necessity for conceptualizing these developments through the framework of internationalism—specifically a form of “internationalism from below” that circumvents the state.

Third World nationalist movements of the late twentieth century accomplished the liberation of many colonized Asian and African countries from Western powers based on different political ontological claims in their pursuit of independence. Many made use of the United Nations as an arena for nation-state legitimization, or mobilized claims to prior,

precolonial national culture to justify their independence (Fanon 2004; Kelley 2002; Okihiro 2016; Getachew 2020). Even the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) initiated after the Bandung Conference in 1955, which claimed as its mission resistance to the binaries of Cold War super-power campism, rapidly became entangled in Soviet and Chinese militarism in order to defend the newly founded nation-states' "territorial integrity" and state sovereignty.

Though there is much to learn from the Third World internationalist tradition and its situated historical importance to past national liberation movements across the world, we also recognize its shortcomings, particularly in Asian contexts,<sup>1</sup> as well as its incompatibility with Hong Kong's situation. The UN was never an avenue for Hong Kong to seek self-determination: China put forward a motion to strip the territory of its "non-self-governing" status in 1972, likely because such a status is a requirement for UN recognition of official decolonization efforts. China's UN Ambassador Huang Hua claimed this would violate the country's "sovereign right."<sup>2</sup> Moreover, without cultural origins with which to propel claims for decolonization and postcolonial statehood, Hong Kong is more suited in many ways to what Reignite Press and a Taiwanese activist interviewee refer to in their chapter of this book

<sup>1</sup> In one early example, Indonesian President Sukarno's conflict with the Netherlands to determine sovereignty over West Papua rarely, if ever, consulted Papuans themselves but assumed that Indonesia or the Netherlands, as sovereign nation-states, had the right to decide. Moreover, the Indonesian government was heavily backed by Soviet war technology in the military phase of the conflict beginning in 1960. After victory, the eventual plebiscite run by Indonesia in 1969 was limited only to Papuan tribal representatives, some of whom allege being coerced to vote affirmatively for integration into Indonesia. Arguably, Indonesia undercut the stated goals of the 1955 Bandung Conference and the resulting NAM: That the coalition of nations would focus on colonized people's self-determination and seek resolution of tensions through peaceful negotiations.

<sup>2</sup> File A/AC.109/396. Joshua Wong and Jeffrey Ngo, two prominent Hong Kong pro-democracy activists, characterize this episode as a "historical mistake" that UN members were duped into passing. While there is some truth to this—Huang's demand to remove the status of "non-self-governing territory" from Hong Kong and Macau was slipped into a 1198-page resolution that was largely meant to affirm the right of colonized people to seek decolonization—it is clear that the US and UK, as members of the General Assembly, assented to this demand and were thus partially culpable for stripping Hong Kong and Macau of these rights that could eventually lead to claims for decolonization. See here for an English translation of Wong and Ngo's analysis: <https://hongkongfp.com/2016/11/08/china-stripped-hong-kong-right-self-determination-1972-distorted-history/>.

as a “minor” relationality, one that “doesn’t necessarily have to follow the lead of the major.” Similarly, Francois Lionet and Shu-mei Shih have described “minor-minor” relations that refuse the top-down hierarchies of the “major-minor” as the grounds for a new sense of transnationalism (2005), which helps us to understand how Hong Kong’s material limitations amongst inter-imperial competition can helpfully be turned toward an “internationalism from below.” Such a turn allows us to examine emergent forms of grassroots solidarity between workers that engage in global, cross-border exchange rather than party-led bolstering of nationalisms, and the empowerment of state formations to act with more authority within multilateral fora.

Building upon Hong Kong’s legacy of radical anti-capitalist and anti-colonial organizing (Zhou 2013; Cheung 2012; Leung 2017; Au 2020), this book is an attempt to locate leftist thought and decolonial practices that have emerged in Hong Kong in the midst of its social movements, so as to identify its presence and further establish the city’s contributions to a larger, global discourse on leftism and decoloniality. The term “decolonial” has a rich tradition within the Western hemisphere from Latin American studies to Turtle Island (North American) and Pacific Islander Indigenous studies, each drawing from and critiquing the specific material and historical conditions of their respective sites (Smith 1999; Trask 1999; Fujikane and Okamura 2008; Byrd 2011; Mignolo 2011). For Hong Kong, which has experienced multiple forms and imperial regimes of governance—franchise colonialism under the British (and briefly the Japanese) and its present “special administrative” status under China’s One Country, Two System model—our use of “decolonial” is informed by Rey Chow’s characterization of Hong Kong as existing “between colonizers,” and the dilemma of a “forced return to a ‘mother country,’ itself as imperialistic as the previous colonizer...” (Chow 1992). Here we extend Chow’s framework to include the outsized role of the US as a powerful, though not officially colonial, imperial power in Hong Kong. These overlapping histories of competing imperialisms, thus, require a decolonialism that confronts internalized colonial epistemologies and attitudes alongside an undoing of the material colonial capitalist political economy itself.

Thus, our vision of the decolonial stands in stark contrast to Beijing’s official “decolonization” (去殖民化) of Hong Kong, which has turned out to be a symbolic cultural nationalist program premised on retaining the city’s colonial capitalist infrastructure and safeguarding it with repressive



colonial apparatuses such as the police force and security ordinances (Chan and Chien 2019). Instead, we draw from the rigorous and well-established tradition of anti-colonial critique in Hong Kong studies, such as the work of Law Wing Sang on “collaborative colonial power” (2009), Mirana May Szeto and Yun-chung Chen on “progressive localism” (2015), and Ip Iam Chong on Hong Kong’s complex and sometimes contradictory new localist identity (2020). Within this complicated history of mixed modes of “non-sovereignty,” a term that we borrow from Yarimar Bonilla’s powerful study of labor activism and protest movements for self-determination in the French Caribbean (2015), we situate Hong Kong’s struggles not only within multiple forms of interracial and interethnic imperial domination and authoritarian repression, but also persistent social inequalities, political injustice, and economic disenfranchisement within Hong Kong society along race, class, gender, and sexual lines. Leftist and decolonial groups such as The Owl (夜貓) and Lausan Collective (流傘) have published, translated, and amplified leftist perspectives from Hong Kong and its diasporas, contributing to transnational discourses that are attempting to chart alternative futures beyond the dictates of colonialism, the bounds of nation-state sovereignty, and the logics of neoliberalism and capitalism. We, the editors, see this book as a continuation of these efforts, which can also produce new openings for further research, especially on the myriad ideas and practices that are not encapsulated in the limited scope of this volume.

From the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill (Anti-ELAB) protests, the COVID-19 global pandemic, and the implementation of the National Security Law (NSL), crises in Hong Kong have continued to unfold and demand new ways of theorizing Hong Kong people’s struggles beyond the reductionist binaries of democracy and authoritarianism, independence and annexation, capitalism and communism, and freedom and repression. The continuous police violence and the securitization of the Hong Kong state through the NSL, for instance, have necessarily placed Hong Kong’s movement in critical conversation with police abolitionists across the world. How can we understand the city’s present struggles by considering Hong Kong’s nascent and historical internationalism from below? In the face of the “New Cold War” rhetoric between the imperial geopolitical contests of the US, the UK, and China, what are the politics and strategies we can identify that provide alternatives to the seduction of global right-wing “solidarity”?

The refusal to be subsumed under the nativist sentiments of “Hong Kong Independence” or US and UK imperial powers is often met by the critique of the left as *lei dei* (離地), literally “being off the ground.” The term has been deployed to depict leftist approaches to Hong Kong’s struggles as too academic, unrealistic, or elitist. The term *zor gau* (左膠) functions similarly. Its literal translation is “left plastic,” and it was formerly used to refer to a detached strata of liberal managerial elite in Hong Kong. Like *lei dei*, *zor gau* now functions to silence progressive or leftist criticism as impractical intellectualizing or sentimentalism. While geographical location does not function as the primary determinant of what and who is *lei dei* or *zor gau*, the coinciding of leftist discourse emerging from diasporic groups with the local critique of leaving Hong Kong as being an exercise of class privilege has perhaps inevitably conjoined *lei dei* and *zor gau* to the diaspora. This determination of one’s class, politics, or stakes in the movement based purely on geographical location also overlooks the complicated and emerging dynamic of Hong Kong political refugees, many of whom have left the city to seek asylum in countries such as the UK in the wake of the NSL. Indeed, it is critical to name the different stakes and general class positions between those who reside in Hong Kong and those who are in the diaspora, since the legal repercussions and material conditions are not the same. However, we believe that these material conditions are not antithetical to but, in fact, central to leftist analyses that are necessary to connect this moment of resistance to the broader traditions of decolonial movements in and beyond Hong Kong. For example, we can think of historical figures such as Sun Yat-sen and Emilio Aguinaldo, whose transnational trajectories and on-the-ground organizing in Hong Kong were both critical to their revolutionary work in mainland China and the Philippines, respectively.

The insistence on the leftist position *reorients* us from the temporary, pragmatic liberal solutions and binary divisions of the present. The latter foreclose generative possibilities emerging from approaches that acknowledge the inherently diasporic and transnational nature of Hong Kong, as well as practices of thinking alongside that go beyond hegemonic frameworks of governance and being (de Sousa Santos 2014). In this light, we reject the dichotomy of *lei dei* versus grassroots. Our volume includes contributions from Hong Kong organizers on the ground, in diaspora, as well as from other global locations who make critical interventions to the current struggles from within. Locating the decolonial left, in our terms,

is about attending to the not-so-visible dynamics underground, and using a broader, transnational scale of historical and theoretical self-reflection to examine the questions at hand. This book is an overview of what we see as leftist, decolonial, and internationalist thinking that has emerged from Hong Kong's most recent wave of protests, which draw upon historical precedents in the territory and in locations elsewhere.

Working with activist observations, theoretical interpretations, and material archives of Hong Kong's resistance, we foreground the key concepts of leftism, decoloniality, and internationalism from a wide range of methods and interdisciplinary approaches. The book is divided into three sections: First, "Grounding the Movement" begins with a situated view of the myriad dynamics and practices of the 2019–2020 protests to examine the historical, theoretical, and affective significances of Hong Kong's contemporary movement activities; second, "Material Life" attends to the lived experiences and material conditions from which the protests emerged, producing a more nuanced picture that goes beyond a binary opposition between state power and civil society; and third, "Internationalism from Below" reorients our vision toward the geopolitical contestations of the so-called New Cold War as well as transnational connections with Taiwan, South Korea, the Filipinx diasporas, and the global abolition movement. In all three sections, we highlight that the political futures of Hong Kong cannot rely solely on an analysis of the "China factor," on uncritical support for the benevolence of Britain as a former colonizer, or on the desired model of liberal democracy represented by the US. Rather, Hong Kong's decolonial and leftist possibilities must draw from and build upon critiques of frameworks of empire and imperialism, continuous coloniality and (non)sovereignty, and the debates around border, migration, and transnational solidarity such as those elicited in our collection of essays.

## PART I: GROUNDING THE MOVEMENT

In the context of Hong Kong, coloniality and state governance are not singular but multiple—China's Beijing Authority, the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government, the continuous entanglement with the British regime, the political and economic influence of the US, as well as Hong Kong people's construction of an alternative "state/non-state" entity through social movements. We have sought to represent analyses that identify and critique the coloniality of state governance and its

polymorphic enactments; these include the movement against neoliberal capital; abolitionist politics; the contested practice of “occupation”; and border politics, which have evoked questions around nationality as well as race and ethnicity. At the same time, we ask the question, where can we see decolonial possibilities on the ground, in the context of Hong Kong’s acts of resistance? This section focuses on an examination of the 2019–2020 protests from a local perspective and the ideological tensions that have erupted as a result of Hong Kong’s colonial pasts and present economic inequality, and then moves toward a broader comparative scale to articulate the impact of China’s policies on the ground in Hong Kong as entangled within dynamics of imperialism and non-sovereignty. The chapters here capture voices from a diverse array of political actors—leftist thinkers, Marxists, trade unionists, abolitionists, as well as protesters whose lives ended during the movement. It shows that the movement’s decolonial possibility relies precisely upon its multifaceted orientations and critiques that extend beyond today’s dominant and sometimes abstract discourse of “democracy.”

Although the popular protest refrain “Restore Hong Kong, Revolution of Our Times” (光復香港, 時代革命)<sup>3</sup> was repeated by many, others have questioned the colonial framing that inhered to the interpretation of the slogan as a “restoration.” The first chapter, “This is Not Restoration” by Tony Wong from the Hong Kong leftist media outlet *The Owl*, begins by examining the way in which protesters’ varied interpretations of the slogan’s idea of “restoration” or “reclamation” indexes the internal contradictions of the decentralized movement’s aims, understandings of the city’s history, and the meaning of liberation. Liberation has been interpreted widely to mean self-governance, universal suffrage, or independence; however, Hong Kong’s entangled history with China has meant that even relatively vague concepts of self-determination remain complicated and contested. Promise Li’s “Self-Determination through Struggle” provides a rich history of local visions of self-determination across the political spectrum, arguing that to mobilize around self-determination is not reducible to localist separatism but, rather, a “politics of autonomy” that is grounded in transnational solidarity and coalition building.

<sup>3</sup> Sometimes translated as: “Liberate Hong Kong, Revolution of Our Times.” Both translations are used somewhat interchangeably, although the original Chinese characters for “liberate” and “restore” evoke the idea of light being restored to an implied darkness—alluding to a form of oppression or undesired state.

Such coalition building and transnational solidarity mean that the very localness of Hong Kong's struggle exists in relation to theories and practices of uprisings elsewhere, such as the anti-police abolitionist politics of the Black radical tradition that formed the foundation of the Black Lives Matter movement. Edward Hon-Sing Wong and Vince Wong's "How to Abolish the Hong Kong Police" provides a systematic critique of the discursive and legal frameworks that enable not only the brutality of police violence but also the carceral logic of reformist demands. It addresses the urgency of joining forces with abolitionists in the US and beyond to effect true change against the carceral logic of the capitalist state. By the same token, Fung Chi Keung and Lee Chun Wing's "Dilemmas of the New Union Movement" complicates the perception that the protests were homogeneous in their embrace of capitalist ideology by providing a critical overview of the challenges and progressive possibilities of the city's groundswell of political and labor unionization beginning in 2020. They argue that it is possible to foreground class-based issues in broader movement demands but that doing so will require the long-term and difficult work of workplace and everyday organizing, despite increasing state repression of labor organizing.

While the rapid mass politicization of Hong Kong people penetrated the workplace like it never has before, it also intensified the feelings of rage, distrust, and hopelessness for many experiencing violent state repression for the first time. Attending to the performativity of life and death entangled in the affective dimensions of the movement, Nazia Manzoor and Wen Liu's "Decolonizing Protest Suicide" provides a reading of deathly performance beyond martyrdom and victimhood regarding the loss of life during the period of mass protests. Likewise, SY Chan focuses on the heavy toll of government repression on Hong Kong people in order to launch an indictment of the betrayal by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) of its own anti-imperialist roots, noting in particular that the party-state's narrative of itself as a "decolonizing" force in Hong Kong, guarding against an always external imperialism, whitewashes the depths of its own exploitation of those on the mainland and Hong Kong people alike. Under the CCP's stifling governance strategies of nationalism and authoritarianism, Chan argues, the material immiseration of millions stands as a stark contradiction to any claims by party officials to be carrying the torch of anti-colonial liberation forwarded by African revolutionaries such as Leopold Senghor, Frantz Fanon, and Amílcar Cabral.

## PART II: MATERIAL LIFE

Informed by leftist practices of historical materialism, material conditions and lived experiences are at the core of our analysis of Hong Kong's resistance movements in the contemporary era. Surfacing local issues related to the built environment, institutions of power, and lives situated in different social locations elucidate a complex ensemble of factors that have contributed toward the mass outcry for democracy and universal suffrage in Hong Kong. This approach therefore attends to both the overtly political and the infrapolitical (Scott 1985; 1990)—that which is commonly viewed to be without political relevance—to uncover its entanglements and imbrications.

The essays in this section look beyond the grand narratives of Hong Kong's contemporary social movements, which generally fixate upon binary power struggles: between the state and protesters from civil society, between Britain and China, or between the US and China, to name a few. In "Between Liberalism and Nationalism," Chris Man-Kong Li highlights the grounded, urban occupation protest strategies utilized in both the 2014 Umbrella Movement and the 2019 Anti-ELAB Movement. Instead of viewing the protests as a desire to secure British colonial-era liberal "freedoms" or as an attempt to establish Hong Kong nationalism to diverge from Chinese rule, Li argues that these large-scale protests can also be viewed as an attempt to reclaim the public's right to the city, in response to the neoliberal financialization of urban space in Hong Kong. In a similar vein, Maurice Yip centers their analysis upon land in "Policing Territory" and articulates how a "property-sovereignty nexus" formulates the foundations of governing power in Hong Kong. Land operates as both property and sovereignty that is secured for the ruling state through colonial-era leasehold land systems that have remained in place past 1997 and is further concretized through the institution of the police. To move toward decolonial possibilities, Yip calls for an unsettling of the property-sovereignty nexus that begins with the undoing of property-related myths and reconceptualizing the locus of sovereignty, and thus, our relationship with land. This reorientation of sovereignty and land relations is reflected in Michael Leung's "To Become Something More," which documents the rural-urban tensions that have emerged in land resistance movements led by villagers in the New Territories region. Leung's work explores the "prefigurative politics" expressed in the use of arts and cultural events within these movements and also ponders the generative potential of

“wild and transversal writing” in fostering a larger, transnational decolonial movement that finds solidarity with similar struggles located elsewhere. His work therefore departs from narratives of global, geopolitical power struggle, and bypasses the nation-state, looking instead to local sovereignty struggles in rural, agrarian spaces for indications of a transnational decolonial movement in the making.

The latter portion of this section features essays that address institutions of power and lived experiences that are elemental in Hong Kong but go frequently unexamined for the city’s relationships with colonial power and its potential as a site for decolonial change. Jia Tan’s “Decolonizing Hong Kong Television” produces a decolonial history of the long-standing broadcast media service, Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK), which explores its origins as an outlet for British colonial propaganda. Yet, despite its intended purposes, Tan exhibits how specific programs screened on RTHK have blurred the line between political and infrapolitical, expressing a “decolonial vernacular” through which a critique of colonial power is lodged. Lai Tsz-him’s “Awakening Christianity as a Decolonial Ally” produces an analysis of the Church in Hong Kong, which has been historically positioned as an institution that serves colonial power. In spite of this historical role, Lai identifies a splintering faction of churches and Christians who have turned instead to decolonial interpretations of their faith. Lai regards the visible involvement of Christians in the 2014 Umbrella Movement and the 2019 Anti-ELAB Movement as an outworking of this decolonial turn within the Church<sup>4</sup> in Hong Kong, which raises the possibility of effecting broader changes in Hong Kong society as a whole, given the influential power of the Church.

While the preceding essays touch on the contradictions and conflicts that existed in different communities in relation to the city’s protest movements, Ngai Tak Kin’s “Notes on Sex Work in Hong Kong” explores these conflicts alongside the ambivalence that come with the high stakes of supporting a movement that may not, in fact, produce material benefit for marginalized subjects in Hong Kong. Writing as the Director of Midnight

<sup>4</sup> Lai utilizes “Church” (upper-case “C”) to refer to the whole body of Christians, regardless of their membership in different denominations and congregations. For more details on this terminology and other related terms, please see Chapter 11 of this volume.

Blue, a nongovernmental organization that works with “male and transgender”<sup>5</sup> sex workers, Ngai presents a clear account of the structural marginalization faced by these workers and relates the 2019 Anti-ELAB Movement to their work as an organization and to the lives of those in the sex worker community. In the gray area where decolonial resistance does not necessarily guarantee liberation or protection for sex workers, Ngai’s essay showcases how support for Hong Kong’s resistance may not always operate in openly political expressions. Instead, the infrapolitical houses a space for tacit support or disapproval, from which to reflect upon the actual stakes and material consequences of political change.

The final chapter of this section focuses on Southeast Asian migrant domestic workers (MDWs) and their lived experiences of labor and care in Hong Kong during the COVID-19 pandemic, which emerged as the mass-scale Anti-ELAB protests entered into its denouement at the beginning of 2020. Written by migrants solidarity committee, autonomous 8a (misocom), a radical collective focused on community building and mutual aid, “Notes on Migrant Domestic Care Work in the Age of COVID-19” features first-hand reports and interviews with MDWs that reveal how the pre-existing exploitative conditions of their work—from low pay to labor law and immigration precarity, from exposure to poor or abusive working conditions—became magnified and compounded during citywide lockdown conditions. While the chapter presents a nuanced account of the “at times good, at times bad” situations faced by the MDWs, it also exhibits their active participation in labor organizing and mutual aid, which highlights their role as agents in enacting material changes for their future. Echoing the insights of the previous chapter, misocom’s account of MDWs’ lives under the pandemic fuses the political and the infrapolitical, surfacing multitudes of structural problems and movements for change that have been subsumed within and, in turn, eclipsed by Hong Kong’s mass-scale political movements.

<sup>5</sup> “Male” and “transgender” are terms that are utilized by Midnight Blue to refer to the primary communities that they serve. These are, however, not mutually exclusive terms, as the former generally relates to bio-medical designations of sex and the latter relates to gender identity. For a more in-depth footnote on the terminology, please see Chapter 12 of this volume.



### PART III: INTERNATIONALISM FROM BELOW

The 2019 protests took on distinctly global proportions, as many activists launched international lobbying campaigns and global news media broadcast round-the-clock coverage of local developments. This section, however, focuses on the nascent drive to draw out Hong Kong's relationship to elsewhere, beyond the tools of state diplomacy or lobbying. We name this section after Internationalism From Below (IFB), "an organizing project of a network of socialist activists that seeks to build transnational solidarity with and between movements for social justice and democracy" (IFB 2020). One of the many collectives that sprang up during a year of global protest in 2020 following the deepening crises of the COVID-19 pandemic and the police murder of George Floyd in the US, IFB's transnationalism and emphasis on grassroots solidarity embodies the global shifts that engulf Hong Kong and that the following authors analyze and critique.

The culture of resistance in Hong Kong has long been transnational, ranging from the cross-border labor strikes between Hong Kong and China in the early twentieth century and the radical fight alongside Korean agricultural workers against a neoliberal world order during the Hong Kong WTO Ministerial Conference in 2005, to the liberal international lobbying actions of student activists during the 2014 Umbrella Movement. Hong Kong's uprising in 2019, however, took place amid radically different conditions: under the specter of a "rising China" and the belligerent Trump administration in the US, a surging worldwide right-wing movement exploited Hong Kong people's desperate calls for attention with vacuous and often thinly veiled Sinophobic displays of solidarity.

Into this fray, the left in Hong Kong has been largely powerless while calls for grassroots mobilizations and international solidarity from below struggled to resonate within world-historical forces of resurgent Cold War binarism and inter-imperial clashes. Nevertheless, leftists and decolonial scholars and activists in Hong Kong and around the world forged what can be considered a new type of internationalism beyond the state, building transnational alliances and connecting in the face of increasingly homogeneous experiences of exploitation and oppression in a fully globalized capitalist market. JN Chien's "Hong Kong Card" traces the development of discursive and material conditions for the so-called New Cold War, trumpeted by both US war hawks and Chinese nationalists.

He concludes that such rhetoric obscures the seesaw of competition and collaboration between US and China capitalist regimes behind a veil of Cold War binarism, and that, because of Hong Kong's non-sovereign and inter-imperial stuckness, it is the perfect site through which to mask—and thus unmask—these contradictions. One of the clearest examples of how this globalized circuit of capitalist exchange between the US and China is securitized can be seen in Matthew Tran's historical and comparative examination of policing in Hong Kong and the US, which details how police forces formed in both locations to secure the safe operation of colonial capitalist accumulation, of the franchise colony and settler-colonial plantation respectively. It follows that both the US and Hong Kong have naturally collaborated to protect the flow of transnational capital as well, which, Tran argues, gives resisters a clear sight line for global abolitionist praxis.

As we look toward Hong Kong's place within transnational theories and practices of resistance, we begin to think about different formations of relation across various sites, temporalities, and scales. Brian Hioe's chapter examines the historical parallels between Taiwan and Hong Kong's experiences caught between China and the US. Complicating any direct one-to-one correspondences on temporal and spatial scales, Hioe argues that moving outside the shadow of "the China factor" and forming connections with the rest of the world will be necessary for both Hong Kong and Taiwan in a future of restricted options and increasing repression. Much of this work is already occurring: Tiffany Hui and Selena Liang tackle Hong Kong's reliance on foreign migrant labor, particularly domestic workers from the Philippines, who, along with workers from Indonesia, form a vast underclass of exploitable, precarious domestic labor that props up Hong Kong's hyper-capitalist economy. They draw critical transnational connections to show how US exploitation and destabilization of the Philippines is what has created mass labor migration that benefits both the Philippine elite and Hong Kong's majority Han population. This provides clear reasons to diverge from lobbying the US state and instead to join in struggle with other minoritized, colonized, and oppressed people, especially those within one's own city. The final chapter examines the work of activists connecting through their organizing against global militarism and imperialism. Starting from an act of solidarity with the Hong Kong movement, Emily, a Taiwanese activist living on South Korea's Jeju Island, speaks with Hong Kong's Reignite Press in a "conversation between two small islands." They forward a specific praxis of "the minor" that can draw

together multiple sites such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, Okinawa, Guam, and the Philippines and provide an avenue to build power outside state formations to address global forces of imperialism and militarism that engulf us all.

Taken together, we believe that this collection marshals a substantial, though still loose and undetermined, groundswell of analyses and solutions to the problems facing Hong Kong: capitalist hyper-exploitation secured by the police monopoly on violence; enduring colonial structures that remain useful for the enrichment of elites from China and the West alike; and the dangers of right-wing and exclusionary thinking—all of which must be met with grassroots, democratic resistance that neither depends solely on state structures nor harbors colonial nostalgia. As with all edited collections, there have been constraints on the range of topics, sites, and subjectivities that we have been able to include. One topic that requires much more attention is the function of the Hong Kong–China border, such as how it has been policed and its role in the violent, mass incarceration of asylum seekers and mainland Chinese migrant sex workers. It will also be critical to examine further the rich history of cross-border activism, from labor to language, between Hong Kong and mainland Chinese people and the importance that will play in Hong Kong’s future resistance. Far from an attempt to foreclose debate, we hope that striking out in this direction—an attempt to locate the decolonial left—will inspire further conversations, studies, and most of all, practices across the many boundaries and borders that stand in the way of our solidarity.

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**Reignite Press** aims to be at the intersection of ideology and activism. Broadly from a leftist political tradition and activist practice, we rethink and intervene the history and the present of mainland China. Being alongside academia, we draw upon leftist thinking from mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan, as well as the West and the Third World to engage dialogues with China's current knowledge structures and diverse ideological milieus.

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**migrants solidarity committee, autonomous eight-a** The authors from migrants solidarity committee, autonomous 8a connects and walks with the grassroots. They endeavor to fight for the genuine autonomy of peoples with mutual respect from the grassroots, where participating in democracy in their own capacities becomes possible. They devote themselves to the mass of migrant workers and their movement through connecting with and getting to know the grassroots. They continue to take part in migrant workers' movements from different perspectives, distributing information.

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