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THE COMING OF AN OVERSEAS HONGKONGER

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IDENTITY AND TAIWAN-HONG KONG CONNECTION: REFLECTION ON THE LEGACY OF THE UMBRELLA MOVEMENT

📅 24 April 2024 📁 identity, Social movement 💬
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Written by Desmond Hok-Man Sham.

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It was the evening of 1 October 2014. I, then an overseas Hongkonger international student studying in the UK, was among the thousands of people rallying at Portland Place in Central London. It was the largest protest outside the Embassy of China in London after the Tiananmen Massacre in 1989. People chanted slogans for democracy and universal suffrage, echoing the demands of the protesters in Hong Kong. Some of them also held the news photos and wished to let the passers-by know what was happening in Hong Kong. The rally in London was just one of the [many solidarity actions](#), large and small, spontaneously organised by overseas Hong Kong communities across the globe. While most of the demonstrators at the London rally were Hongkongers living in the UK, overseas Taiwanese were also joining

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in to support the cause in Hong Kong. Five years later, during the Anti-Extradition Movement, I was a postdoctoral fellow and a part-time lecturer in Taiwan. As I was based overseas during these important movements, I will reflect on the legacy of the Umbrella Movement from an overseas Hongkonger's perspective. Having gained first-hand insights into the growing concern of Hong Kong in Taiwan and the mutual gap of understanding between Taiwanese and Hongkongers after a few years of living and working in Taiwan, I will also discuss the future of the Taiwan-Hong Kong connection.

The overseas Taiwanese communities' solidarity with the Sunflower Movement gave me an insight into what and how the diasporic communities could do to support a pro-democratic cause at home. Within a few days of the protestors' occupation of the legislative chamber on the night of 18 March 2014 (afternoon in the UK), messages calling for solidarity actions had already been spread among Taiwanese students in the UK. Sit-ins took place at Trafalgar Square in Central London. Overseas Taiwanese communities across different continents also coordinated a global solidarity action day to show their support for the causes of the Sunflower Movement on 29 and 30 March (depending on time zones). More than showing support for the causes and encouraging the activists at home, these overseas rallies also serve as platforms to

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allow the wider international community to understand the situation in Taiwan.

Similarly, overseas Hong Kong communities also organised solidarity actions in places where they lived to show support for the Umbrella Movement and to let the wider communities in the host countries understand what was going on in Hong Kong. There have been [diaspora mobilisation and activism](#) traditions in places with more established Hong Kong communities, dating back to the support of the 1989 Democratic Movement in China. Hong Kong communities in the UK, including international students and British Hongkongers, supported the campaigns against the [Moral and National Education proposal in 2012](#) and the [Northeast New Territories New Development Area plan in 2014](#). While the more established Hong Kong communities planned their solidarity action to coincide with the student strike before the actual outbreak of the Umbrella Movement to show their support, it was the (online) witness of [police brutality](#) and [firing of tear gas in the city centre](#) sparked the anger and anxiety of many overseas Hongkongers, resulting a large-scale spontaneous global solidarity action across the globe. People could no longer tolerate sitting at home and doing nothing. These overseas Hongkongers tried to do whatever they could to show their support and tell the world what was happening in Hong Kong, including calling

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large and small solidarity actions somewhere near them.

Looking at such diaspora mobilisation and activism in the longer term, it can even be argued that these spontaneous solidarity rallies for democracy in Hong Kong during the Umbrella Movement were an earlier version of the [‘International Front’](#) (*gwok zai sin* 國際線), [popularised during the Anti-Extradition Movement in 2019](#). The overseas Hongkongers’ anger and anxiety, as well as their love and concern for Hong Kong, led to these non-politically active overseas Hongkongers spontaneously organising and attending solidarity actions and rallies across the world. While they might have become quieter at different times, their concerns about Hong Kong did not die out. When there was a big crisis or ‘event’, such as the Anti-Extradition Movement in 2019, [the overseas Hongkongers became active and mobilised again](#). In short, the Umbrella Movement paved the way for the coming of overseas Hongkonger identity, built upon their shared concern for Hong Kong. After the ‘exodus’ of Hongkongers since 2019/2020, I have also observed that Hongkonger diasporic communities use different methods, such as organising [markets](#), [festivals](#), and [exhibitions](#), setting up [community libraries](#), and [creating artworks and cultural products](#), as a way to preserve Hong Kong culture, express Hong Kong identity, and communicate with the local and the wider Hong Kong diasporic

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communities. How overseas Hongkonger identity will evolve is something worth further observing and examining.

Taiwan has been a special case in international solidarity and supporting Hong Kong's pro-democratic cause. Overseas Taiwanese people participated in overseas solidarity actions of the Umbrella Movement. The civil society organisations in Taiwan also (co-)organised several solidarity rallies during the Umbrella Movement and the later Anti-Extradition Movement. There has been observable growing interest in Hong Kong in recent years. [Formosa Salon](#) (倫敦講臺), [a London-based Taiwanese student group formed after the Sunflower Movement](#), asked me to share some background knowledge of democratic development in Hong Kong during the Umbrella Movement. They would have invited a few more speakers to share various topics about Hong Kong in the next few years. A screening of the short film series [Ten Years](#) attracted a full lecture hall audience in Taipei. Any modules related to Hong Kong in universities in Taiwan, be it political, social, or cultural, would almost guarantee enough enrolment. Recently, there have also been more Hong Kong-related art exhibitions in Taiwan, curated by Taiwanese or overseas Hongkonger curators.

There is no doubt that China is a significant factor that brings Taiwanese and Hongkongers closer to each other.

Nevertheless, if both groups only tried to engage with each other and interpret their counterparts through the lens of the so-called China factor, they would not understand how each other has become the societies as such at this moment. They would also not understand what the others had experienced and how their identities were made and evolved, especially those that could not be explained in terms of the China factor. In Hong Kong, the understanding of Taiwan has long been framed by the lens and narratives of Kuomintang due to the historical Communist-Kuomintang rivalry. [Pro-Kuomintang groups](#) have long been (mis-)called 'pro-Taiwan groups' (*can toi tyun tai* 親台團體) in Hong Kong. Influenced by this frame, many Hongkongers had long been ignorant of the Japanese colonial period and its socio-cultural significance to Taiwan; they were unaware of democratic development and localist historiography of Taiwan until around the late 2000s and the 2010s.

Meanwhile, understanding local identity merely as antagonistic to China, as some Taiwanese do, would miss the complexity of the making of evolving of Hong Kong (cultural) identity. Rather than a political movement, local consciousness or local cultural identity has long been embedded in [Hong Kong literature](#) and [popular culture](#). [The memories and commemoration of the Tiananmen Massacre](#) have been an integral

part of the formation and transformation of Hong Kong's identity.

In Taiwan, I once taught a module on Hong Kong literature and cinema in relation to identity. In the module, I elaborated on the regional connections of Hong Kong and the complexity and multiple layers of Hong Kong identity. Through these teaching activities, I wished to bring in a more nuanced understanding of how Hong Kong society and cultural identity evolved. In recent years, more and more Hongkongers immigrated to Taiwan. While there have been disillusionments and disputes between the Hong Kong immigrants and Taiwanese people, some Hong Kong immigrants also attempt to engage with the Taiwanese societies and better understand their new home. Members of the overseas Hongkonger communities also organise various events to let the Taiwanese societies better understand Hong Kong culture. Hopefully, these exchanges would let both groups better understand each other.

The Umbrella Movement has been significant for the coming of overseas Hongkonger identity and connecting the Taiwanese and Hongkonger communities. While the shared concern of and resisting the growing hegemonic China is the starting point of such connection, both communities should go beyond that to better understand and empathise with each other.

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