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Citation

TSE, Justin Kh, "Mapping the umbrella movement: Uncovering grounded theologies in Hong Kong" (2014). *Research Collection School of Social Sciences*. Paper 3076.

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Mapping the Umbrella Movement

Uncovering Grounded Theologies in Hong Kong

12.9.14 | [Justin K.H. Tse](#)

[Note from the Managing Editor: Stephen Chan, who was scheduled to be the final contributor to our symposium on The Umbrella Movement and Theology, was not able to submit his essay. In his place we have asked the symposium moderator, Justin K.H. Tse, to submit a final essay.]

As this *Syndicate* forum on the Umbrella Movement and theology winds to a close, the physical occupations in Hong Kong seem to be nearing their end stage. With court injunctions, police clearances, statements of support from the People's Republic of China (PRC) for the Hong Kong government, the attempted voluntary surrender of Occupy Central leaders to the police, and a student hunger strike after over seventy days of street occupations, it might seem late in the game to call for the mapping of “grounded theologies,” “performative practices of placemaking informed by understandings of the transcendent,” woven into the political constitution of the Hong Kong protests.³³ However, as I shall argue, there is no better time to get to work.

The three previous contributors to this forum agree that the Umbrella Movement protests have altered the way that political agency is imagined in Hong Kong. Kung Lap Yan's **opening declaration** that the Hong Kong protests constitute a *political* movement, not merely a social one, captures the tenor of this paradigm shift,³⁴ what Rose Wu calls a “**New Pentecost**”³⁵ and what Sam Tsang observes to be an opportunity to **decolonize biblical hermeneutics**.³⁶

As Kung writes,

As a theologian, my answer is that no matter how and when the movement will end, the questions like chaos and order, reconciliation and tension, politics of identity articulated from the

*movement would remain valid during the movement and post-movement. The theological significance of the Umbrella Movement does not lie in its political success, but in the questions that will shape the political movement of Hong Kong for a long time to come.*³⁷

Whether or not there will continue to be tents, umbrellas, booths, and rallies on the streets of Hong Kong, our contributors concur that the Umbrella Movement is far from over. Even if the Hong Kong government is successful with its legal strategy to completely remove the physical occupations, the work of theological reflection will become even more timely because it will be time to examine at a subterranean level what changes have been wrought in the theopolitical consciousness of Hong Kong citizens, whether they have been for, against, or indifferent to the protests. Indeed, one need not support the protests to arrive at the conclusion that a paradigm shift has occurred. One Hong Kong journalist who has been vehemently against the demonstrations, Michael Chugani, reiterates time and again that the Hong Kong protests have seared the soul of the city.³⁸ So too, pro-establishment politician Regina Ip speaks of the need for healing and a new identity, though her proposals that Hongkongers need to learn to love the Chinese nation-state will only add fuel to the fire of protest.³⁹

The time is ripe to interrogate the new geographies that are being constructed and contested by these new theopolitical subjects. However, let me begin this call for research by first asking *Syndicate* readers to indulge me. I am not an academic theologian, but a social scientist—a geographer, to be precise. This is not an act of false humility; John Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory* put an end to such dissembling when he showed in 1989 that social scientists do theology all the time.⁴⁰ Instead, if my proposals for a new theological methodology in Hong Kong sound foreign to those trained in the ways of academic theology, its strangeness can perhaps be blamed on my disciplinary formation.

As an ethnographic researcher, I can't help but observe an irony about the way that theology in Hong Kong is done. As many theologians and pastors in Hong Kong hold degrees from Anglo-American and German institutions, public theological scholarship in

Hong Kong has focused upon interpreting empirical data within borrowed theological and theoretical frameworks while creating definitional taxonomies, ideal types, and intellectual trajectories. While these practices privilege scholarly elites, the irony is that these same scholars participate in shaping events on the ground. When I did ethnographic fieldwork at a forum on social concern and political participation at Yau Ma Tei's Truth Lutheran Church in 2012, I heard Hong Kong theologians vigorously debating whether Martin Luther's "two kingdoms" theology was a "model" or a "paradigm," whether Karl Barth and the Barmen Declaration required Christians to stand apart from the current regime, whether Dietrich Bonhoeffer's conception of "truthfulness" permitted pragmatic relationships with the authorities, and how the call of John Howard Yoder and Stanley Hauerwas to bear witness against Constantianism should be put to work in Hong Kong. I learned that this was typical: a joke, as one key informant quipped, was that "everybody around here is either a self-stylized Barth or Bonhoeffer."⁴¹ One could rightly accuse such theologians of imposing onto the ground Western theological categories. But as scholars of what Anthony King calls "actually existing postcolonialism" point out, such borrowing produces political subjectivities and theological geographies of its own.⁴² Hong Kong theology is no less Hong Kong theology for articulating Hong Kong events via such frameworks. Indeed, these intellectual practices make of Hong Kong a theological playground.

Indeed, the situation in Hong Kong leading up to the Umbrella Movement would not have taken the political shape it did without this theological *modus operandi*. In January 2013, Occupy Central with Love and Peace's Benny Tai proposed a nonviolent movement of civil disobedience based on his reading of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s struggles for decolonization.⁴³ Combining these insights with those of virtue ethicists like Alasdair MacIntyre, he contends that there must be a higher law of virtue for which it is ethical to conduct "illegal" actions to save the body politic, which he articulated on the night anticipating the August 31 Beijing decision against civil nominations as a house on fire and a body that is sick.⁴⁴ Tai's articulation of "illegal" civil disobedience met with the opposition of Kong Fok Evangelical Free Church's Rev. Daniel Ng Chung-man, the megachurch pastor who since 2013 has threatened to "excommunicate" any of his congregation members who would

participate in Occupy Central and who (as Kung points out) has forbidden the use of his church's toilets for any Umbrella Movement protesters.⁴⁵ As **Tsang suggests**, Ng is as much of a borrower as Tai; Ng's source is Wayne Grudem, whose reading of passages like Romans 13 leads him to oppose any "illegal" activities as challenging both the authorities putatively put in place by a sovereign God and the authority of the Scriptures that call for such political submission.⁴⁶ The same is true of the opposition of the Anglican primate, the Most Rev. Paul Kwong: in his published dissertation, he reveals that his theology is undergirded by the work of Miroslav Volf, which leads him to pursue pragmatic dialogue with the Beijing and Hong Kong governments instead of supporting the Hong Kong protesters.⁴⁷ *Syndicate* readers might also find this dynamic operating in the three previous forum posts: **Kung's use** of Latin American liberation theology and theories of church-state relations, **Wu's citation** of King in the struggle to decolonize Hong Kong, **Tsang's debate** between Ng-Grudem and the anti-supersessionist approaches of Mark Nanos and Sze-kar Wan.

In other words, Hong Kong theology is inseparable from the non-Hong Kong theological sources woven into its constitution. The Umbrella Movement, however, signals that it is time to change. If the demonstrations have indeed altered the political and theological consciousness of Hong Kong citizens—indeed, if the Hong Kong protests have produced sites of worship on the street that articulate new theologies for a new Hong Kong⁴⁸—such morphologies also signal that the paradigms of the students, scholars, clergy, and public intellectuals are shifting.

Indeed, the Umbrella Movement has forced academics onto the streets. Though the chancellor of universities in Hong Kong is the Chief Executive C.Y. Leung—which is why university students have facetiously called for their chancellor to resign—university vice-chancellors have played active roles in mediating between the protesters and the government: the Chinese University of Hong Kong's (CUHK) Joseph Sung made visits to the ground and has vouched repeatedly for the protesters' civility, while Lingnan University's Leonard Cheng moderated the dialogue between the Hong Kong Federation of Students and the government on October 16.⁴⁹ Professors from across the political and intellectual spectrum have signed open letters of support for the student strikes since before the Umbrella Movement, and noted Hong Kong faculty

members, including those from the major seminaries from across the theological gamut, have sat in solidarity with the students.⁵⁰ Some have joined the Hong Kong Church Renewal Movement's Rev. Wu Chi Wai in organizing a Pastoral Care Group; others have held seminars on democracy with the protesters. Such faculty involvement has not been lost on the Anti-Occupy Central "blue ribbon" protesters: Anti-Occupy's Leticia Lee took the fight to the University of Hong Kong and CUHK on October 17, calling for the firing of tenured professors Benny Tai and Chan Kin-man for inciting the students to illegal acts through Occupy Central.

That faculty have been so involved in their students' struggle indicates that a new form of public scholarship in Hong Kong is taking shape. As the academy gets closer to the ground, grounded actors can be seen as serious theological practitioners, including those whose theologies may seem pro-establishment, secular, and pragmatic. Indeed, given Milbank's annihilation of the boundary between theology and secular social theory, it does not matter that these academics that I discuss are a mix of theologians and secular scholars. As Kung, Wu, and Tsang have also noted before me, what is really going on in the Umbrella Movement is a grounded debate about political theology. Because the initiating actors have been students, scholarship has been a site of struggle, which means that these faculty and administrative debates, as well as the swelling public interest in universities and seminaries in Hong Kong, indicate that these concerns about the future of Hong Kong is not restricted, as it is commonly held in popular Hong Kong parlance, to the "post-1980s" (八十後) and "post-1990s" (九十後) generation of the Hong Kong Federation of Students and Scholarship.⁵¹ What the Umbrella Movement has done, in short, is to move university academics, theological and secular, from the ivory tower to the streets, dismantling the image of scholars as purveyors of Western elitism and joining them in solidarity with the masses of the Hong Kong public.

In this light, I am calling for the usage of the ever-shifting urban landscape of Hong Kong as a theological source in its own right. While Ackbar Abbas has observed that Hong Kong's cityscape is constantly subject to a culture of "disappearance,"⁵² Southeast Asian urban geographer Terry McGee has called for scholars to get "under" the city to examine how historic colonial geographies still thread their way into contemporary postcolonial landscapes.⁵³

To do this, Hong Kong theologians could show that Hong Kong historiographies put in conversation with contemporary Hongkonger geographies reveals that Hong Kong has not only been a theologians' playground, but has made theologians of all Hongkongers. In 1985, historian Carl T. Smith launched a new wave of Hong Kong social history with a provocatively titled monograph: *Chinese Christians: Elites, Middlemen, and the Church in Hong Kong*. Smith sought to reclaim Hong Kong history from both the British colonial and anti-colonial Marxist historiographies that gave British colonizers complete agency in Hong Kong. Seeking instead to trace Hong Kong Chinese actors from the birth of the colony in 1842, he found that the majority of the elites who became go-between compradors between the British colonizers and the colonized Chinese had been educated in Christian schools. As his student Elizabeth Sinn then showed, these Christian-educated middlemen pragmatically achieved their legitimacy by taking on the Taoist ritual functions of the Man Mo Temple and holding court as quasi-Confucian elites in the Tung Wah Hospital. Since Smith and Sinn, a new paradigm of social history took shape in Hong Kong that has resulted in renewed interest in local Hong Kong histories from the nineteenth century up to the present. These narratives situate the landscape between the British and Chinese empires and analyze how colonized Chinese subjects collaborated with the colonizers to legitimize their political power.⁵⁴ In this analysis, the struggle between elites who now collude with the new Hong Kong regime and the pro-democracy protesters who challenge their legitimacy makes more sense. Theology, it turns out, has long been about elite power in Hong Kong, whether those theologies are Christian or not.

The Umbrella Movement presents a geographical challenge to this theological elitism, precisely by rearticulating theology not for the elites, but for those protesting for political agency. Instead of creating taxonomical models and intellectual genealogies about how the Umbrella Movement could theoretically engage theology in the abstract, scholars who take the movement seriously might turn their attention to how the eclectic convergence of local Chinese and colonial Christian traditions has done to construct the Hong Kong elite historically. In this way, the new democratic tradition that arose in the 1960s and 1970s and that has culminated in the current occupations might be seen as radical indeed.⁵⁵ Asked this way, the joke that everyone is a Barth and a Bonhoeffer in Hong Kong will no

longer need to be told. The theological debate will not be between, say, Daniel Ng's Wayne Grudem, Paul Kwong's Miroslav Volf, and Benny Tai's Martin Luther King, for Ng, Kwong, and Tai will be recognized as theological actors in their own right, contesting each other—and not each other's representative Western theologian—over visions of how Hong Kong's theological publics should look. Indeed, the actions of those on the ground—Joshua Wong undertaking a hunger strike, protesters setting up shrines to Chinese territorial gods as well as for Chinese sacraments, the constant debates about Basic Law as the constitution of the body politic—will be seen as grounded theological actions worth the time of academic theologians to examine in Hong Kong terms. Even non-Christian theologies count: one fascinating figure, Professor Horace Chin Wan-kan, has conducted Taoist rites that subtly call the legitimacy of the current regime into question and frequently communicates Taoist, Buddhist, Confucian, and Chinese territorial theosophies on his social media platforms. If the elite compradors of the nineteenth century used these eclectic theological convergences to secure their own political power, theologians like Chin are reworking those traditions for democratic self-determination, with Chin calling outright for the autonomy of Hong Kong as a sovereign city-state as a way to preserve Chinese territorial traditions from what he perceives as British and PRC colonizations.⁵⁶ So too, the contributions to our forum are significant because they too use the Umbrella Movement, not some abstract theological source, as the point of departure for constructive theology. Kung's account makes the protesters defining "Occupy Central" over against the "Umbrella Movement" an act of theological definition. Wu centers the feminist "Slut Walk" initiators and lesbian demonstrators she met as theologians in her piece. As much as Tsang disagrees with Daniel Ng, his concern with his exegetical method stems precisely from the grounded reality that Ng's exegesis constructs theological realities. Theological actors are not interesting because of where their sources come, but because of how they put theology to work on the ground.

To pay such close attention to the political agency of these once-colonized theological subjects is to decolonize the study of theology. That act of theological decolonization, my forum colleagues and I have argued, is the theological significance of the Umbrella Movement. As these grounded theologies percolate to the surface of Hong Kong's society, the landscapes of the protests challenge the

colonial elitism of theological scholarship. It turns out that the real work of theology is done on the ground, for Hong Kong's political actors can be heard as saying that secular publics remain constituted by theology. For those who have ears to hear, they teach us that those who do politics, at least in the shaping of Hong Kong's political landscape, are really all theologians.