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1

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Can American Christians care about Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement?

By Justin K.H. Tse

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It's a delicate task to write about how American Christians, especially evangelicals, can care about Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement. "I shan't get into details," the embattled Chief Executive C.Y. Leung told a local journalist, but this is not entirely a domestic movement.

Leung's sentiments echoed the insinuations being passed through the Chinese press. The details, as it is said, were that foreign (read: American) forces had allegedly funded pro-democratic groups like Occupy Central with Love and Peace, Scholarism, and Apple Daily. As the story goes, the Umbrella Movement would end just like the Maidan and Color Revolutions: the supposedly American-funded leaders would lose control of the movement, and the ensuing chaos could destroy it from within.

This is an incredibly popular narrative: when the South China Morning Post interviewed Beijing tourists visiting Hong Kong, they replied confidently that they "of course" did not support the movement: "We know that it's because university students are stirred up by the American government to take such actions," they said. One might think that they were channeling Ivan Illich's 1968 excoriation of America-China relations: "In Asia, the U.S. is threatened by an established power - China. The U.S. opposes China with three weapons: the tiny Asian elites who could not have it any better than in an alliance with the United States; a huge war machine to stop the Chinese from "taking over" as it is usually put in this country, and; forcible re-education of the so-called "Pacified" peoples. All three of these efforts seem to be failing. Who counts as an "American Christian" is quite loose: if you are American and Christian, the allegation is that you just might be an interventionist, especially if you don't actually physically live in America right now. Don't try to follow up with me to say that you're actually part of the British Commonwealth; let's admit that the American empire is really quite the leviathan.

The problem, though, is that this America-in-Hong-Kong narrative's details don't add up. Sure, calls for democracy sound awfully American, but the society for which the protesters call looks nothing like America. The students are calling for civil nomination - the election of candidates chosen by the people themselves which doesn't really resemble the primary process in the United States, not to mention that the American president is actually indirectly elected by an electoral college.

The aim of Hong Kong's direct democracy is to contest what the protesters see as the collusion among the government, private property tycoons, and the criminal underworld, giving political agency to what C.Y. Leung infamously called in the New York Times "half of the people in Hong Kong who earn less than \$1,800 a month." The theologies that are being produced by the Umbrella Movement aren't the sort of civic religion made possible by America's democratic polity; they are articulations of faith from the street that place a premium on contemplation over strategic collusion with the establishment.

In other words, "democracy" means something very specific and non-American in Hong Kong. Born out of very local circumstances in the 1970s, Hong Kong democracy is about the people's right to challenge the private collusions of the colonial state. When corruption at a local Catholic school resulted in the British colonial government's attempt to stifle a student occupation of the Hong Kong Cathedral Compound during the Golden Jubilee Incident of 1978, a democratic movement was born, challenging the British colonial education department as in cahoots with religious institutions. This democratic movement developed into local activism for grassroots workers: in the 1980s, Christian clergy challenged the colonial state's collusion with bus companies, utility corporations, and urban planners by fighting to keep bus and electric fares low and to build an Eastern Hospital close to factory laborers on the east side of Hong Kong Island. In 1989, these same democratic actors educated the Hong Kong public in solidarity with students occupying Beijing's Tiananmen Square, which meant that they were prepared with a critical mass on June 4 to launch the Million Person March in Hong Kong to protest the People's Liberation

Army's violent crowd-clearing tactics up north. After the 1997 handover, 500,000 Hongkongers hit the streets on July 1, 2003 to contest the government's anti-secession bill based on Basic Law's Article 23, which they argued would limit speech and religious freedoms. Led by the Civil Human Rights Front, this ecumenical coalition of Roman Catholic, evangelical, liberal, and feminist groups had a broader agenda than Article 23: they wanted the rights of migrant workers, sex workers, pregnant women from China giving birth in Hong Kong, and homeless "street-sleepers" to be recognized in Hong Kong, and they also wanted to challenge the power of real estate developers over people's literal livelihoods in the city.

Democracy in Hong Kong is about siding with the local people against the elite establishment, which means that the alliances formed by those on the ground are often with the sexually, racially, and politically marginalized. The vote is just the tip of the iceberg. The idea is that if you give the vote to the marginalized, they will be recognized with human dignity and choose someone whose policies will slant toward the common good, not the concentration of wealth at the top. In the words of Scholarism's Joshua Wong Chi-fung: "I believe in Christ. I believe everyone is born equal, and they're loved by Jesus. I think everyone, therefore, should get equal rights in the political system."

C.Y. Leung wouldn't get into the details, but they are important. If these local flavors of Hong Kong democracy are so infused with the Christian practice of solidarity with the poor, American Christians might discover that caring about the Hong Kong protests is really not about helping the protesters. Or, back to Ian Illich: "I am here to suggest that you voluntarily renounce exercising the power which being an American gives you ... I am here to challenge you to recognize your inability, or powerlessness and or incapacity to do the 'good' which you intended to do."

There is more, though. In *China and the American Dream: A Moral Inquiry*, sociologist Richard Madsen says that the ways that Americans see China is "as much about America as about China," construing "American relations with China in terms of common understandings of the core values of American society." Certainly, we don't want to conflate America with evangelicalism. But then again, Madsen suggests that this America-China complex was born of American Protestant missionary efforts of the nineteenth century, and as a scholar in Asian American studies, I happen to agree.

American Christians might care about the Hong Kong protests because (as Madsen suggests) we can't help it, but maybe what's happening in this Special Administrative Region of China could also turn Madsen on his head. If indeed Hong Kong democracy is about siding with the politically marginalized and challenging what Cornel West calls the "oligarchs and plutocrats" running the political system, then the way to care about Hong Kong is to let the Umbrella Movement reveal the cracks in our own society. As with the Hong Kong issues of human rights, property values, and educational politics, the Hong Kong protests raise some tough questions for Christians in America about where our solidarities lie. In light of Ferguson, Ayotzinapa, the revelation of drone strikes as a Middle East foreign policy, and even the 2008 financial meltdown, the Umbrella Movement asks American Christians to evaluate whether the practice of our faith is about being one with the least of these.

I said that it was a delicate task writing about whether American Christians could care about the Umbrella Movement. It turns out that it's sensitive not because of the Chinese propaganda around "foreign forces" in Hong Kong. It's because it calls Christians in America to evaluate our Christianity.

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