

新 香 港

Hong Kong 2.0

For tens of thousands of Hong Kong teenagers, childhood was canceled in the fall of 2014. They had to grow up overnight to lead a hard-fought and at times violent struggle for true democracy. But the Umbrella Movement was more than just police standoffs and sleepless nights. By taking over large swaths of the city center, these young warriors reenacted a way of life known only to their grandparents – a slower, sleepier, more romantic Hong Kong.

Harcourt Village – or Umbrellaville as I preferred to call it to give it more panache – was easily the most beautiful place in Hong Kong. It was where I spent nearly every evening during the week and all day on the weekend. It was where I ate and frequently slept, observed and reported, taught and learned, saw old friends and met new ones. For 11 weeks, it was my primary residence.

A new way of living

As an author who writes almost exclusively about Hong Kong, who makes a living from pointing out the proverbial elephants in the room, I am the city's biggest fan and its harshest critic. I have said that people in Hong Kong can be divided into two broad categories: selfish and very selfish. I have written about the double trouble of ***gong hai*** – the trophy generation raised by domestic helpers and spoiled rotten by middle class parents – and ***fai ching*** – people born after the 1990s who live off their family and lack direction in life.

If everyone has two sides to his personality, then for 79 days in 2014, it appeared that our good side – the part of us that is suppressed by life’s demands – broke loose. Everything that every cynic has ever written about the people of Hong Kong, every indictment and criticism ever leveled against its youth, demanded a rewrite.

Volunteerism – The slogan “If not me, who? If not now, when?” summed up the can-do spirit in Umbrellaville. Villagers distributed supplies, directed pedestrian traffic and even cleaned public toilets without being asked or prompted. If someone saw so much as a chewing gum splotch on the sidewalk, he would quietly pick up a putty knife and start scraping. Soon, two others like him would join in and a fledgling gum removal team would spring to life.

Across the three villages, everyone pitched in whatever way they could. Doctors treated the injured, lawyers advised the arrested, carpenters made furniture, construction workers built bamboo scaffolding⁵², musicians played music, bankers gave money, teachers taught, counselors counseled, mothers cooked, grandmothers knitted. Outside the villages in mountains far far away, climbers risked their lives and hung giant pro-democracy banners from cloud-hugging cliffs.

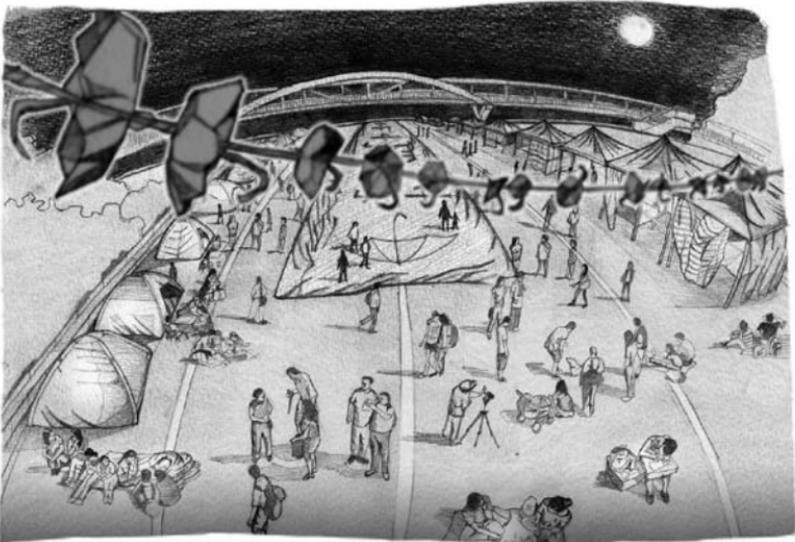
Inclusiveness – In Umbrellaville, age was no indication of rank, and being different was no barrier to social acceptance. On the Grand Stage, student leaders commanded more clout than political veterans. Off the stage, people of all races and creeds sat side by side in discussion groups, turning Harcourt Road into the cover of a liberal college’s recruitment brochure. Cantopop stars Anthony Wong and Denise Ho, both of whom happen to be openly gay, attracted bigger crowds than other celebrities.

The Hong Kong Pride Parade held every early November typically draws less than 100 participants. In 2014, however, the turnout surged to several thousand, in large part because of two new heterosexual supporters: Alex Chow and Lester Shum. Their famous bromance – thanks to G-phone’s tireless matchmaking – was a favorite topic in Admiralty. The good-natured tease about their so-called “hehe” relationship (a concatenation of two masculine pronouns) was remarkable considering that the subject matter of sexual orientation remains taboo in socially conservative Hong Kong. Homophobia – and other kinds of prejudice – appeared to have no place in Umbrellaville.

52 – Bamboo scaffolding is an age-old construction technique in southern China, dating back centuries. Even today, bamboo scaffolds are widely used in lieu of steel poles in property development projects across Hong Kong. During the occupy movement, volunteer construction workers used their time-tested skill to build barricades, many of them several stories high, to reinforce protest zone borders.

Sense of community – Umbrellaville harkened back to the old Hong Kong we loved and missed. All along Harcourt Road, micro-communities emerged where people smiled, the streets were inviting, and the nights – the nights were just beautiful. There were no colleagues to compete with, no bosses to impress, and no bank statements to measure one’s self-worth. The occupy movement forced all of us to take a long, hard look at our way of life, and to challenge the conventional wisdom that social progress is achievable only through greater affluence and more development. There is a simpler, easier way that doesn’t require either a credit card or a fast car.

Indeed, carlessness has its perks. In Admiralty and Mongkok, we saw people riding their bicycles and scooters on main roads and highways. We couldn’t remember the last time we saw bicycles and scooters on main roads and highways. When night fell, we saw strangers sitting in circles and chatting on the street. We couldn’t remember the last time we saw strangers sitting in circles and chatting on the street. These simple activities may be commonplace anywhere else in the world, but they have all but gone extinct in emotionally unavailable and socially awkward Hong Kong since it transformed from a cottage industry economy into a global financial center.



A renewed sense of community in Umbrellaville

Sex and the city – It was said that more condoms were sold in Admiralty than anywhere else in the city and during those 11 weeks than the rest of 2014 combined. That’s a remarkable feat given that Hong Kong

is often called the sexless city – a recent study ranked it the third lowest in sexual satisfaction out of two dozen territories surveyed. The tent city in Umbrellaville – and the scenic waterfront nearby – proved to be highly conducive to love and romance, especially for young people with raging hormones and a sense of adventure. The equal parts Woodstock and spring break atmosphere set the mood for casual encounters, new relationships and even marriage proposals. Some joked about a cohort of “Umbrella babies” conceived in Admiralty who would grow up to be the next generation of freedom fighters.

A new way of thinking

Hong Kong is a city that doesn’t read, never writes and barely wants to think. In our so-called “instant noodle culture,” the only mental stimulation we get is soap opera on television, celebrity gossip in tabloid magazines and the sound of cash registers at shopping malls. Garbage in, garbage out.

The Umbrella Movement changed that, however temporarily. It did more than just bring out the citizens’ good side and show them an alternate way of life; it also sparked a cultural renaissance. 79 days of immersion learning elevated the intellect of an entire generation. During that period, many believed that the future of Hong Kong would no longer be forged on university campuses but at each of the three encampments.

Anti-materialism – Sitting at the makeshift library on Harcourt Road one evening, it suddenly dawned on me that I hadn’t spent any money in days. The only reason to open my wallet was to buy lunch boxes for the volunteers or take a taxi home after the last subway train had left Admiralty. I hadn’t swiped any of my half-dozen credit cards since the movement began.

Shopping – Hong Kongers’ favorite pastime after moneymaking – was the furthest thing from any villager’s mind. Retailers complained about dismal sales because of snarled traffic and vanished tourists, but the real culprit might have been a loss of libido for material gratification. At a time when citizens had the future of their city in their hands, trifles like designer jeans, name brand handbags and expensive watches all started to look a little, well, immaterial.

Before September 28th, young people – and many adults – couldn’t tell Martin Luther from Martin Luther King, Jr., Mahatma Gandhi from Mohammad Ali. On September 28th, it was as if Peter Pan had grown up overnight to self-organize, self-sustain and self-determine. What was once a talk-of-the-town topic like the release of a new iPhone or a soap

opera's season finale became completely irrelevant. Even Facebook walls received a facelift: food porn, selfies and narcissistic rants had all given way to protest updates and stories of random acts of kindness. Protesters were reading Karl Marx and debating Georg Hegel one moment, and dodging pepper spray and pushing back angry thugs the next. It was the best "moral and national education" there ever was.

Inventiveness – Cynics call Hong Kong a cultural desert, and for good reason. Rampant materialism and cut-throat peer competition have drained the last drop of creative juice out of citizens. Talented men and women trade their paintbrushes and dance shoes for briefcases and pinstriped suits. But you wouldn't know that from visiting the Umbrella Village. Decades of pent-up creativity suddenly burst out of the Genie's bottle, releasing the Henri Matisse and Martha Graham in us and turning the protest sites into galleries and theaters.

They say necessity is the mother of innovation. Umbrellaville was full of outside-the-box ideas such as charging booths for smart phones and Wi-Fi routers powered by car batteries. The greatest invention was a 24-hour study corner that was a library, classroom, cafeteria, town center and storm shelter wrapped into one. The facility was like a living, breathing animal – it grew in size and new features nearly every day.

For over a decade, the SAR government has tried but failed to promote recycling and combat air pollution⁵³. Protesters succeeded on both fronts in a matter of weeks. Together, the three villages ran the city's largest recycling program, with volunteers diligently sorting papers, water bottles, soda cans and even leftover food. During the 79 days, the Hong Kong Observatory consistently ranked Admiralty the least polluted area in the city. The air quality ratings of all three protest zones went from "serious" or "very high" to an unprecedented "low." It was due in large part to the absence of vehicular traffic but also a result of the villagers' discipline and ingenuity.

Political engagement – For generations, young people have been told to focus on their studies. They have been taught by parents and teachers to stay away from politics because it is "dirty" and that it has nothing to do them. But the ghastly whistle of tear gas has jolted our youth out of their political apathy. Many realized that politics affects them personally and directly. Every decision from the minimum wage and property prices to how their tax dollars are spent, right down to the number of bus routes in their local district is made by partisan politicians who work the political system.

53 – Survey after survey has shown that the poor air quality in Hong Kong is the leading reason why many highly skilled expatriates are relocating to Singapore, Tokyo and other Asian cities.

Many also realized that video games, karaoke and television shows might have been social anesthesia prescribed by the ruling elite to divert their attention from what really matters. Oblivion and non-participation are the reason that gross injustices inflicted by the functional constituencies are allowed to fly under the radar for so many years. Once awoken, this so-called “Umbrella Generation” would never relapse into their existential coma. Instead, they are armed with a new sense of purpose and ready to make up for lost time.

Lion Rock Spirit rekindled

On October 28th marking the one-month anniversary of the occupy movement, tens of thousands of citizens gathered on Harcourt Road to observe 87 seconds of silence, one for each shot of tear gas fired by riot police. At the precise moment of 5:57pm, they pop-opened their umbrellas in unison, a sight that resembled a time-lapse video of flower blossoms in a rainforest.

The 11 weeks I spent in Umbrellaville were the happiest in all my years in Hong Kong. I alternated between euphoria and tears of joy, gratitude and amazement. Protesters occupied city streets, but by displaying exemplary discipline and world class charisma, they also occupied our hearts. I felt sorry for friends and family who weren't in Hong Kong to experience it themselves, because so much of what went on had to be seen to be believed.

If the old Lion Rock Spirit was premised on hunkering down for trickle-down economic benefit, then the new Lion Rock Spirit would be about social justice and civic participation. Who could have predicted that the biggest political crisis of our time would renew our age-old ethos and bring out the absolute best in us? No one knew whether the new way of life and intellectual rebirth would last beyond the occupy movement. What we did know was that a seed had been planted in each of the protester's head, and that the seed would germinate when the conditions were ripe.