

Changes Come *Passion Stays*

by To Ting and Andrew Choi Tsz-hong



When thousands of young people ringed the Legislative Council to oppose funding for the new express rail link in January, the media scrutiny was intense. Hong Kong's media have used the label "post-80s" to describe the youths involved in the anti-Express Rail link campaign. Their movement has been seen as a new phenomenon, viewed in some quarters as inspirational and as threatening in others. But for veterans of Hong Kong's social movements, the young activists are simply expressing their concerns about Hong Kong's development. They say the "post-80s" are continuing a tradition of youth striving for better welfare and a fairer society.

One of those veterans, 59-year-old Lai Chak-fan hosted an internet radio programme from the scene of the protests. Lai, a political commentator, was a social activist in the 1970s. He says people's concerns have changed over time. In the 1960s and 1970s, it was the conflicts with the British colonial government that led to the development of a local social movement. For instance, the Chinese Movement of the early 1970s advocated recognition of Chinese as an official language in government. Lai, who was a secondary school student at the time, published a student magazine and mobilised around 600 young people to join the movement.

"Many social movements in the 1970s soon turned into anti-colonialism campaigns," says Lai.

Today, however, Lai believes there is an economic component to movements and many students participate in social movements because of economic problems. Lai says most youngsters have a higher education level than their predecessors, but earn less money in comparison. They cannot buy their own apartments and remain poor. He says this has prompted some of them

to speak up and tell society about their problems.

Lai describes the "post-80s" movement as "a collaboration of ideals and actions". Those actions, such as the "hardship walk" and kneeling had an infectious effect, attracting more people to join them.

For 62-year-old Augustine Mok Chiu-yu, today's young activists also differ from his generation because they can make use of independent media to voice their opinions and ideas. Mok, a well-known activist and performance artist, was prominent for his active participation in the Chinese movement and the Chu Hai Incident. In 1969, students from Chu Hai College boycotted classes to protest against the school's control over the student union. Twelve students were expelled. Although Mok was not a Chu Hai student, he skipped work to join the protest outside Chu Hai College.

A year later, Mok co-founded *The 70s Biweekly* with his friends. The magazine was an important platform for the principles of Hong Kong's emerging student and social movements, such as youth autonomy, anti-imperialism and cultural-consciousness. These issues were seldom mentioned by the mainstream media.



An issue of *The 70s Biweekly*

Mok is encouraged by the growth of independent media in Hong Kong. Inmediahk.net and Citizen's Radio are just two of the examples. Mok supports citizen reporters in these outlets as he believes they can truly reflect the injustices in society.

"I don't believe in mainstream media. They often distort the meaning of protests in their reporting," he says.

It is not just the number of media outlets that has increased, the direction of information flow has also changed. Professor Chow Po-chung from the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) says information is no longer held in the hands of a small group of people.

"But now, it is a democratic process. Everyone has a chance to participate."

In the past, the coverage of the mainstream media was crucial to social movements because it was the only way for activists to disseminate their messages to the public. "Their main concern was what the media thought about a certain event," says the politics professor.

However, it is now possible for anyone to transmit their own messages through social networking websites such as Facebook or Twitter. When everyone has their own platform to exchange ideas, activists can alter their strategies. They no longer place the media's response as a top priority because there are more ways for people to get information outside of the mainstream media.

The internet has made it much easier to mobilise people around a cause. Chow says because of the



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limitations of communication in the past, not many people would be able to join a demonstration. During his undergraduate studies in CUHK in the 1990s, he could only rely on wall posters to call on students to attend a rally. "Perhaps there were only 20 to 30 people at a protest," he says.

But now, with a mass mailing list, an article can be sent to everyone in a school by clicking a "send" button. "This is very powerful in terms of message distribution," says Chow.

This improvement in communication methods has led directly to a structural change in participants. Social movements were once elite systems in which a group of organisers with power led the movement. "But now, it is a democratic process. Everyone has a chance to participate," says Chow. "It is not a vertical and one-way flow of power any more."



Chow Po-chung says the internet is powerful in summoning people for a movement.

“You realise life is not just about money and fame after joining social movements.”

While there are more outlets for youngsters to exchange their views, legislator Leung Yiu-chung says there are also more diverse methods for young people to express those views.

Besides marches and rallies, Leung points out that youngsters today use more body language and performance arts to vent their anger. Percussion performances, songs and street dramas are just a few of the forms.

Leung, 56, was a young activist in the 1970s. He chose education as his contribution to the social movement of his time. In 1979, 76 “boat people” were arrested while protesting for the right of abode on land in what became known as the Boat People Incident. Leung helped them in their struggle.

“Apart from traditional demonstrations, I educated the children of boat people,” says the secondary school teacher. He and his fellows also established night schools for workers. Many people at that time only had a primary level of education, while others studied to junior secondary level. Literacy, Leung believes, is a tool for people to know their rights.

Leung says diverse expression in social movements is “good and important” as it encourages personal growth in different ways. It helps to build perspectives and a sense of direction in life. The softly-spoken, grey-haired activist adds: “You realise life is not just about money and fame after joining social movements.”

While some people regarded the young protesters who clashed with police outside the Legislative Council on January 16 this year as radical, Leung has another view. He too was once considered a radical when his group, April Fifth Action chanted “end one-party dictatorship” at a protest in 1988.

The phrase is commonplace now but was almost unheard of back then. When asked if the youngsters were radical, the veteran says the definition of “radical” shifts over time and according to circumstances.

However diverse the methods used to express their diverse views, it seems today’s young activists share a common view of Hong Kong as a land that belongs to them. The movement has a more “indigenous” feel compared to the anti-colonial flavour of the social movement of the 1970s. Back then, there were two main factions – the *Guocui*, or Nationalist faction and the Social Action faction. “The difference in factions was rooted in the different interpretations of social issues,” says Yeung Yiu-chung, who was a significant activist of the Nationalist school.

According to Yeung, the Nationalist faction focused more on the development of China. They believed that social problems could be solved as long as China became a stronger country. Therefore, the Nationalists aimed to familiarise people with China. For example, they

organised exhibitions introducing the achievements of China at Hong Kong City Hall.

On the other hand, the Social Action group was more willing to criticise China when there were policies it disagreed with.

Nevertheless, both factions shared the same goal – to strive for a better society in Hong Kong. “All of us thought that university students should not stay in the ivory tower. We should care more about the community,” the school principal says. Both Social Action and Nationalist activists joined the Chinese Movement and Diaoyutai Island Movement in the 1970s.

Today, there are no such distinct camps among young activists. They are here, simply to express their discontent about society, and ask for the awareness of the others. No matter how many changes there have been in Hong Kong’s social movements, they are continuing a tradition, “they are still showing their concerns to society,” says Yeung. ▽



01-03: Protests of the Diaoyutai Movement in the 1970s
(COURTESY OF AUGUSTINE MOK CHIU-YU)

