

The Occupy Movement and Democracy in China

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The First Occupation

Thanks to the dozens of people still occupying Tim Mei Avenue, this year we are still staging a 16 day sit-in and sleep-in outside the Central Government Offices to remind all the people in Hong Kong that the Right of Abode issue, after 16 years, has not yet been solved. In January 1999 the Court of Final Appeal gave the children of Hong Kong citizens, who were born in China, the right to come to Hong Kong and be reunited with their families. The then Hong Kong government produced disproportionate figures about the numbers of possible new arrivals, and asked the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress for a reinterpretation of the Basic Law. As a result 90 percent of the children could not come to live with their parents.

With concerned groups we stage a sit-in every year to protest the move of the government of that time, because legally speaking it was the Court of Final Appeal which was entitled to ask for a reinterpretation and not the Hong Kong government whose move was clearly illegal. So what right has the government to say now that the people occupying some places in Hong Kong are going against the law and are destroying the legal system here? The government itself was the one who went against the law in Hong Kong in 1999, as several hundred lawyers pointed out during their silent march at that time.

Since 1999, we have added one more day every year to our series of sit-ins, and we will go on, until all the children are allowed to be reunited with their families in Hong Kong. Three years ago, our 13 day sit-in was held under the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank, during the first Occupy Central movement, which lasted 11

months. This year we are glad to see our tent in the middle of the other occupiers belonging to the Umbrella Revolution.

Reoccupy

Occupy Admiralty started at the end of September 2014. It was a protest against the method of electing the Chief Executive in 2017, as provided for in the Basic Law. They are not free elections because the candidates will be practically chosen by the Chinese leaders in Beijing. The media said that after 79 days of occupation the movement ended when the police finished clearing all the areas concerned. The government insisted that all the occupations were illegal. They made the Courts intervene, and then said that everyone who continued to stay in the occupied areas was breaking the law. They did not admit that the government itself violated the law in 1999. Jesus himself opposed the use of the law by the powerful people of his time. People killed him according to laws made by themselves to support their power.

However, the determination of the Hong Kong people to continue the movement is really strong. In fact the Umbrella Revolution is still going on: there are still more than 100 tents outside the Central Government Offices; every night young people go shopping and chanting slogans for democracy in Mongkok; big yellow banners continue to appear on the hills and in other parts of the city; yellow umbrellas accompany protests of every kind almost everyday; prayers and other religious activities, including Masses, are offered regularly in the area of Tim Mei Avenue, where a tent for prayer remains open day and night.

The Young

Some time ago, a 14-year old girl drew two flowers near a figure of a yellow umbrella stuck on the so called "Lennon Wall" in Admiralty. She was surrounded by a lot of policemen. and taken to a police station, where she remained for 27 hours. When taken to court, the judge ordered her to go to a home for children. It was like a prison for her. This incident could have become an embarrassment for the government, had the High Court not freed her immediately some hours later. It seems that Hong Kong people

are more and more determined to fight for democracy and human rights.

The Occupy Central movement was not unknown to Hong Kong people, due to the fact that the first Occupy Central action under the Hong Kong Shanghai Bank building lasted 11 months, from October 2011 to September 2012. After that two university professors and a pastor initiated talks about a new Occupy plan regarding the election of the Hong Kong Chief Executive two years ago. Hong Kong's university students started a boycott of classes. Then secondary school students created the incident that ignited the start of the protest in the streets.

In fact the Hong Kong students have set a very good example of how to fight bravely for a new society in the most proper way for the whole world and for all the students in other countries to follow. We should be proud of them. One of the most precious experiences for us has been to join our school students on the streets. Secondary school students would teach the primary school students; university students would help secondary school students with their assignments; professors would share their knowledge with university students, etc. Right from the very beginning, the Christian students were continuously asking themselves whether they were going in the right direction. They had prayer meetings with the distribution of Holy Communion and then Masses immediately after the protest erupted. The student leaders explained their actions intelligently and calmly, and made their decisions with courage. They never thought that they would succeed all at once.

The Families

Generally speaking the parents of the students, including the secondary school ones, were supportive of their children's stance. Many of them went to Admiralty on the afternoon of September 28th to ask for the release of the student leaders already detained at the police station for two days. Of course there have also been other cases of families split in two: parents against the children, brothers and sisters against each other, and even husbands against wives. Heated discussions took place around the dinner tables of many Hong Kong families. And so what? Had not Jesus foreseen this?

Many passages in the Gospels treat of the strained relationships in families because of his name, and because those who followed him did not have a stone to put under their heads, like Occupy people sleeping in the tents.

True Democracy

During these months the Hong Kong people have had the chance to talk about and discuss true democracy. They have discovered that it is not only about freedom in elections. In a true democratic society the center is the people themselves. What the students wanted to learn was always related to the people or for service to the people.

Of course many different groups, from both the left and the right, joined the movement, and all felt themselves to be part of it. Some people on the right would like to fight only for Hong Kong and its social system. They were saying that they do not like being part of China, they do not like so many rude people (as they perceived them) coming everyday from the Mainland, they remember with nostalgia the colonial times. They even did not like mixing with people like us whom they called leftists. Yet it was the Hong Kong government, which started to turn Hong Kong people against Mainlanders. In 1999, the government said that 1,675,000 would come to Hong Kong from the Mainland and take Hong Kong people's jobs, if the Court of Final Appeal's verdict of 29/1/1999 was implemented.

Moreover we think that democracy should not only be established in Hong Kong, but in every place on the Mainland as well. In this respect the Umbrella Revolution is just a follow up to the 1989 Tiananmen Square democratic movement. Chinese young people, especially students, have had a special role in Chinese history. Starting from the May Fourth Movement, up to the Cultural Revolution and the 1989 Democratic Movement, the Chinese students' relentless campaigns for justice and social equality have succeeded in changing definitively China and Chinese society. They have even influenced other societies in the world as well.

Hong Kong in China

On the other side of the coin we see the development of Chinese nationalism. Boosted by the economic achievements of recent years, and due to the employment of a labor force of hundreds of millions of Chinese people, who worked for low salaries for almost thirty years so far, Chinese leaders feel powerful and very much respected when they visit other countries in the world. They want to show everyone that China is great, and that it can freely decide who their friends and their enemies are. They foster nationalism in order to build up support for the government among all the Chinese people.

The Occupy Central movement however has made Hong Kong more international than ever. Being already completely part of China, it is still home to many foreigners. Many minority people, especially domestic workers, have joined the movement as well. That is why we often sang “The Internationale” during the demonstrations. In 1989, the university students in Beijing frequently sang the same song. The enthusiasm that marks the young people when they sing it, or sing the other songs written purposely for the Umbrella Revolution, is a sign that their hearts are burning with great ideals. That is why this movement cannot be stopped by any police force or army. No government can suppress with its police the desire for democracy on the part of a country’s people. If the Hong Kong government thinks that this problem has been solved by the clearance of the main occupied sites, it fools itself.

True Communism

Of course we do not think that democracy will come simply when the Communist Party loses power in China. Communism is an ideal that Christians share as well, as we can see from Acts, Chapters 2, 4 and 5, what the first Christian community did two thousand year ago. In this sense democracy could mean real power to the common people, without classes which would materially differentiate persons from other persons. In this sense during the Occupy movement, we were stressing that we were not against communists as such, but we felt that because some in the upper

echelons of the party have shifted to revisionism, they do not put their ideals into practice. Even during the years of the Cultural Revolution, when dogmatism prevailed, Christians held talks regarding the values of pure Marxist communism. It is undeniable that the communist movement and its revolutions changed the face of China for the better in many aspects, even when all the religions and religious people were under attack. The Kingdom of God was developing outside the Church, and even when the Church was being persecuted. Communism does not equal atheism. A human communism in which all the people could dialogue, without having people thrown in jail because their ideas were different, could be an important step towards creating a “new earth and new heavens”. These themes were part of the discussion during the movement.

One Country One System

The problem is that revisionists govern China now, while in Hong Kong we have a savage capitalist system. They are allied with one another at the moment. Chinese leaders met some of Hong Kong’s top capitalists just before the Umbrella Revolution started, but they refused to see the student leaders, even to the point of not allowing them to enter China. We do not think that the concept of “one country, two systems” is a correct one. We hope that the Umbrella Revolution in the long run can bring about a completely new “one country, one system”. The new social system will not be the present one on the Mainland or in Hong Kong, nor the present one in Taiwan for that matter. In the new democratic society there will not be any people in prison for their thoughts, there will not be boundaries of any sort between some Chinese people and other Chinese people, there will not be any enemies of the nation, the death penalty and life sentences will be abolished. In the new society all the people will be equal in all aspects.

Hopes for the Future

Let us hope that one day the government of China will really be composed of people from the common grassroots, and that it will allow all the people in the country to discuss true democracy without boundaries of any kind. Let us hope that the future Hong

Kong government, when it comes into existence, would be a real bridge between Hong Kong people and Mainland people. Let us hope that it will not just convey the decisions of the Central Government to the Hong Kong people, rather that it would bring the genuine hopes of Hong Kong people to the Chinese government.

Let us hope that the so-called leftists in Hong Kong, especially the trade unionists, would think back to the ideals of their youth, when they were not looking for influence or power; they only had one task in life: staying with the proletarians and supporting them.

Let us hope that the true communists in China as well as we Christians, will abandon the path of reciprocal condemnation, and work together to be at the service of the people, according to our common ideals. Together we would only seek one kind of power, the power of serving the people with our whole heart, with our whole soul, and with our whole mind. Then we will see the new international communist society, the new world, the new Kingdom of God completely established in the universe.

A Thankful Wish

The sit-in continues. Every time we go back to Tim Mei Avenue it is like entering a place of spiritual retreat. This year we do not feel isolated like in other years. We are surrounded by people, young and old. We have to thank them because they accepted us from the very beginning. The first night we were there, it had just finished raining. They found a tent for us. They cleaned it, put it up to dry, and filled it with blankets and sleeping-bags. Mutual help and understanding has been a characteristic of this movement. We are all brothers and sisters.

Long live Umbrella Revolution!