

# Defining Politics in an 'Apolitical City'

## An Ethnographic Study of Hong Kong

Sonia Lam-Knott (National University of Singapore)

### Abstract

*Hong Kong has been described as a city that prioritises socio-economic stability at the expense of political engagement. Despite recent protests — such as the 2003 demonstration with half a million people taking to the streets — that seemingly dispel such statements, Hong Kong youth activists claim that the city remains apolitical. This paper seeks to make sense of this discrepancy between the protests seen on the streets of the city and the observations and statements made by these youths. In attempting to unravel this puzzle, this paper highlights the importance for anthropologists of understanding how politics is conceptualised amongst their informants, which in turn determines the peculiar manifestations of political actions in that societal context. This paper argues that in Hong Kong, there are discrepancies between youth activists and the general population in how politics is framed and situated in relation to everyday life. It is then revealed that contemporary mainstream attitudes towards politics are actually a product of the city's colonial history. Finally, this paper will explore the sentiments (of indifference, discomfort, or frustration) youth activists and non-political individuals respectively harbour towards politics and political actors, and the obstacles dominant attitudes towards politics pose for youth activists and anthropologists alike.*

## Introduction

On 1 July 2003, public dissatisfaction with the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR) government's support for Basic Law Article 23<sup>1</sup> culminated in a demonstration attended by half a million people. Scholars of Hong Kong politics considered the 2003 protest to be an historic occasion (Cheng 2005: xiv), one of 'the most significant events in the political history of Hong Kong' (Ku 2009: 53), and to herald a new era where participation in activism amongst the local populace would become commonplace (Lam 2004). But by the time I arrived for fieldwork<sup>2</sup> in 2010, the 'political youths'<sup>3</sup> I met claimed that in reality, the Hong Kong population is apathetic and 'uncaring' towards the machinations of the political domain. These sentiments echo recent surveys finding that despite large-scale public participation in the 2003 demonstration, many Hong Kong

---

<sup>1</sup> Article 23 is a national security bill that would enable the Hong Kong police to enter residential premises without warrants, and forbid the use of language that can 'instigate' socio-political unrest. Opponents of Article 23 criticise the lack of public involvement in the drafting of this bill, and believe that it poses a threat to the freedom of expression in the city.

<sup>2</sup> Fieldwork was conducted from December 2010 until July 2012, and involved the use of semi-structured interviews and participant-observation (by being involved in protest actions such as by marching in demonstrations, facilitating political performance art displays, and attending community/group discussions focussing on socio-political issues). A total of forty-five youths were interviewed during fieldwork, though only a select number of informants are featured in this paper. All informants are represented by pseudonyms. Informants came from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. Some youths said they grew up in 'middle-class' households, while others described their families as being 'working-class' (definitions of class categories in Hong Kong are based on income levels, educational qualification, and occupation). However, all informants share common traits in that they were born-and-raised in Hong Kong, and all have university degrees (in subjects such as accounting, architecture, English literature, or journalism).

<sup>3</sup> The Hong Kong SAR government defines 'youth' as a person between the ages of 15 to 24. But official definitions of youth (as a life phase bracketed within a quantifiable age range) do not necessarily conform to societal definitions of youth. For the Hong Kong population, an individual is recognised as an adult only when they have established a family, hold full-time employment and have a stable career, and have their own residence. Most youth informants have not fulfilled any or all of these conditions. As a result, a number of informants, who were in their thirties at the time of fieldwork, would identify themselves as 'youths'. Such experiences of extended youthhood are increasingly commonplace across the world; see literature on 'emerging adulthood' and 'waithood' (Arnett 2000; Honwana 2012). Therefore, the word 'youth' in this paper encompasses a greater age range than that stipulated by the SAR government, used to refer to individuals between the ages of 15 and 35.

people did not develop a long-lasting interest towards political issues (Lee and Chan 2011; Sing and Tang 2012). How can anthropologists make sense of the political furore expressed by the Hong Kong population in the 2003 protest, when juxtaposed with the claims made by local youth activists that political passivity persists in the city? In attempting to unravel this paradox, this paper hopes to demonstrate the need for anthropologists to examine how a locality defines and approaches politics — because only then can we understand why political contestations, and popular sentiments towards the political, manifest the way they do in that society. In the case of Hong Kong, it is shown that the answer to this puzzle posed by the 2003 protest lies in understanding the city's peculiar conceptualisation of the political. Discrepant understandings of what politics entails between 'political' and 'non-political' youths in Hong Kong will be reviewed, along with the attitudes they respectively harbour towards the political sphere. It is argued that mainstream definitions of politics are the product of British colonial governance (1841-1997) that encouraged the city's population to conceptualise the political as being removed from everyday life. The problem this poses for youth activists in their personal lives, and the questions this raises for anthropologists studying politics, will then be examined.

### **Unravelling 'the Political' in Hong Kong**

Immediately after the eruption of the 2003 protest in Hong Kong, scholars began to reassess whether the city is truly apolitical. For example, reviewing the post war years of 1949 until 1979, Lam Wai-man (2004) used thirteen examples of local protests to convincingly debunk the absoluteness of political apathy in the territory. Yet it is important to note that her argument falls short of proving that activism was widespread and sustained throughout the city. In each of the thirteen instances of protest cited by Lam, only a small number of individuals were involved (workers or activists from special interest groups), and they were often short-lived initiatives addressing an immediate socio-economic problem (such as equal pay for nurses, changes to marriage laws, or for rent controls), as opposed to being driven by a desire for widespread structural political reform. In her subsequent work, Lam noted that although the 2003 protest prompted an increase in local activism,

## DEFINING POLITICS IN AN 'APOLITICAL CITY'

she also acknowledged that the overall political culture of Hong Kong still 'embodies factors of political passivity' (2012: 208). Similarly, Francis Lee and Joseph Chan found that whilst the 2003 protest did empower the Hong Kong population, the majority of these people only became 'occasional activists' (2008: 99). The opinions of informants in this paper reiterated such findings. As one youth activist in his thirties, called Fan, explained, even in current protest efforts, 'you always see the same group of people appear, they are the same faces'. In other words, only a select number of individuals partake in protest, whilst sustained political engagement was never/is still not widespread throughout the city. Claims of political apathy in the city are therefore not merely a matter of perception amongst contemporary youth activists, but an observable reality.

To better understand the political culture of the city, an examination regarding the way in which 'the political' is conceptualised by Hong Kong society is needed. But first, how 'the political' is understood in existing scholarship needs to be reviewed. Academic literature broadly defines politics as the exertion, production, and circulation of power within and between societies.<sup>4</sup> Such movements of power can be seen in how a governing body regulates and manages a population (see Lewellen 2003; Heywood 2013), and conversely, how small acts of resistance and grassroots movements can challenge institutional authority (see Ong 1987; Juris 2008). Power permeates all aspects of life; the feminist slogan from the late 1960s stipulating that 'the personal is political' acknowledges the connections between private experiences and the political structures of the public realm, noting that all relationships (from professional to domestic ones) are embedded within interstices of power (Nigam 2008). Michel Foucault similarly proposes that the dispersion of state power through governmentality renders all individuals into political beings (Deuber-Mankowsky

---

<sup>4</sup> The philosophical inquiries towards politics can only be briefly mentioned here. Eugene Miller argues that there remains no universal definition as to what politics entails (1980: 57), further noting that the term 'politics' is derived from the ancient Greek word *polis*, describing a now-extinct political community that bears little resemblance to contemporary post-industrial states. He questions whether the word 'politics' can be applied to discuss contentions witnessed today, suggesting that a new terminology be developed. How academia approaches politics in the twenty-first century must also be revised, because of the changing manifestations of power caused by the spread of neoliberalism (Özyürek 2006).

2008). Reinforcing this expansive approach towards politics, Chantal Mouffe visualises the political domain as encompassing both social and economic activities, arguing that the political should not be 'conceived as being located in a certain type of institution or as constituting one sphere of society' (1995: 105), but actually exists as the interpersonal antagonisms 'inherent in human practices' (2005: 8-9). In other words, politics does not solely take place within the debates at the institutional level of government and amongst political parties, but is also embedded and circulated at the demotic level of everyday social life, such that it 'may be found everywhere' (Vincent 2002: 1).

But academic approaches to politics often differ from how populations of ethnographic study view the concept. Even within a single society, discrepant definitions of the political may exist. In Hong Kong, political and non-political youths harboured divergent understandings of what politics entails. During fieldwork, informants identified themselves using labels of 'political youth' or 'non-political youth'. When asked how they conceptualised such labels, the answers from all youth informants were fairly consistent. The category of 'political youth'<sup>5</sup> refers to individuals who have '興趣' (*xingqu*, 'an interest') towards, and desires to learn more about, political events. More importantly, 'political youths' will act upon this interest in politics by participating in a diverse range of political activities including, but not limited to, conventional forms of formal political engagement such as voting in local district elections, joining political parties and interest organisations, or attending and/or initiating protest rallies and marches; engaging in informal modes of political involvement through attending political discussions and debates that take place at the micro-level of neighbourhood communities; or simply by reading about and displaying an awareness towards political affairs in everyday life. In contrast, 'non-political

---

<sup>5</sup> Whilst only 'political youths' with pro-democracy leanings are represented in this paper, this category actually includes a diverse array of individuals ranging from those who advocate for 'moderate' ideals and protest methods, to those with more 'radical' inclinations. The 'political youths' featured in this paper included individuals from Occupy Central, student groups, and youth activist organisations, along with individuals with no group affiliations (these are not necessarily overlapping categories). Some informants were well-known in activist circles and are actively involved with organising and attending protests, whereas others were less outspoken about their political inclinations and only occasionally participated in demonstrations.

## DEFINING POLITICS IN AN 'APOLITICAL CITY'

youths' are individuals who claim to have little to no knowledge about political developments in Hong Kong, do not partake in any of the formal or informal political actions listed above, and exhibit no interest in — to the point where they may even deliberately avoid and refuse to engage with — any issues they believe to pertain to the political domain. This deliberate refusal to acknowledge politics can paradoxically be conceived as a political gesture in itself, which might thereby lead one to question whether delineations of 'the political' and 'the non-political' are even useful (or valid) analytical categories. But, as Matei Candea noted, anthropologists cannot dismiss the notion that for any society 'the boundaries between what is and what is not political are an important part of [their] reality' (2011: 314), even if there are disagreements within the populace regarding how these boundaries are to be articulated and where these boundaries should lie, as is the case amongst youth informants in Hong Kong.

The current generation of Hong Kong youth activists began initiating protest actions across the city from the mid-2000s onwards, in response to their feelings of dissatisfaction towards the hierarchical power dynamic that exists between the SAR government and the Hong Kong population. Some of the political youths in this paper participated in the effort to prevent the demolition of two colonial-era piers for development projects in 2006 and 2007, opposed the construction of the Guangdong-Shenzhen-Hong Kong express rail link (XRL) that would result in the destruction of rural landscapes in 2009 and 2010, participated in Occupy Central<sup>6</sup> to critique the socio-economic and political inequalities in the city and to experiment towards alternative modes of urban living from 2011 until 2012, and

---

<sup>6</sup> Occupy Central was established by Hong Kong youth activists who were inspired by Occupy Wall Street in the US, and is not to be confused with Occupy Central with Love and Peace (OCLP) that led to the 2014 Umbrella Movement. Both occupations differed in their location and scale. Occupy Central was confined to the HSBC plaza in Central and only involved a limited number of participants (ranging from a dozen to several hundred individuals over the months). In contrast, OCLP expanded across multiple districts (Central, Admiralty, Mong Kok, and Causeway Bay) and involved thousands of protesters. And whilst Occupy Central rejected hierarchies and advocated for horizontal interactions amongst all occupiers, many of the actions at OCLP were planned and spearheaded by three middle-aged individuals (Benny Tai Yiu-ting, Chan Kin-man, and the Reverend Chiu Yiu-ming) and by student political organisations (such as the Hong Kong Federation of Students and Scholarism) who assumed the role of 'leaders' for the movement.

challenged the lack of democratic reforms in the Chief Executive appointment process through the Umbrella Movement in 2014. These informants defined politics in a manner similar to what has been espoused by existing scholarship, acknowledging that contestations of power pervade throughout their everyday experiences. Rather than see the political, social, and economic domains as being compartmentalised aspects of life in Hong Kong, political youths believed these spheres to be connected and capable of influencing each other. This view is articulated by a youth activist called Kip, a man in his early thirties working in the design sector, who, echoing the saying that 'everything is political', asked, 'In Hong Kong, is there anything that isn't political?'. This broad outlook towards politics is reflected by the plethora of concerns activist youths addressed in their discussions and protests throughout the fieldwork period. For example, youths dealt with macro-level topics pertaining to SAR government policies by opposing urban development projects, demanding that expressive rights in the city be protected, and for democratic representation to be realised, as mentioned above; they also tackled micro-level community issues, such as encouraging the preservation of local traditional crafts and promoting sustainable living within ageing neighbourhoods. To reiterate, youth activists displayed an awareness that political powers permeate from the realm of formal governmental institutions to influence the demotic conditions of the population, and vice versa. In their opinion, politics is everywhere, which means that all individuals are already entrenched within the workings of political power, and thus it is impossible for anyone to be apolitical.

In contrast, non-political youths possessed a narrower definition of politics. Throughout our conversations, they described politics as being 'stuff about government', involving electoral engagement, and involving the policy-making procedures and debates between politicians and political parties within the Legislative Council (LegCo) premises. Politics was conflated with the operations of government, conceptualised as being bound within administrative buildings, physically/spatially removed from their everyday environments. Politics was also considered irrelevant to their participation in the economic sphere, and to their familial and friendship dynamics in the social sphere. For example, Fiona, a young professional who

## DEFINING POLITICS IN AN 'APOLITICAL CITY'

claimed to have very little interest and involvement in local politics, said that despite hearing political debates about government performance and democracy through the media, she had no strong feelings towards these issues. She has spent her entire life in Hong Kong, surrounded by family and friends who never discuss politics. For her, politics is 'something someone else deals with', not something she has to be concerned about. When I asked her why she feels indifferent towards politics, she responded by saying, 'Isn't this way of thinking common?' Fiona is suggesting that her attitude of political indifference is the norm in the city, that 'it is the way things are' and is therefore not worth questioning. And in emphasising that other people in the city approach politics in a similar manner, she has removed herself from the narrative — Fiona's answer shared what she believes other people think about politics, without divulging her own thoughts on the topic.

This method of circumventing questions about the political was also observed amongst other non-political informants, which posed difficulties in my attempts to talk about politics during fieldwork. Some of these people would apologetically excuse themselves from the discussion by saying that they did not know enough about politics to talk about such matters, quickly and deliberately changing the focus of our conversations towards subjects such as work and entertainment. Others would respond by joking about how I was a 'passionate' individual for caring about the 'big problems' of politics, the purpose of this gentle teasing being to make me the topic of discussion, as opposed to addressing the subject of politics. Whilst my non-political informants subtly expressed their discomfort and aversion towards politics, members of the public were often more blatant with conveying their disapproval towards any attempt to breach the conceptual boundaries distancing politics from their everyday lives, as seen from their display of hostile attitudes towards youth political involvement. During protests, activist informants and I have occasionally heard the public shout comments such as 'pointless' (to dismiss our actions) and 'go back to school' (to infer that we had no right to speak out because we were too young to understand the socio-political conditions of the city) at us. One memorable encounter occurred when I was sitting on the couches of Occupy Central in June 2012, where a middle-aged man in a business suit approached me, gestured at the site, and said, 'What



is all this rubbish?’ in a confrontational tone. This man lambasted the youths at the site (including myself) for being ‘useless’, for having ‘too much time’, and for causing trouble for Hong Kong society. This was not an isolated incident, and other youths at Occupy Central claimed to have had similar experiences when interacting with the public. Occupiers recounted instances where random people passing by the camp would hurl abusive phrases at them without provocation, and in the case of one young man in his thirties, he remembered that a stranger even threw a water bottle at him and his girlfriend when they were sitting in the reading area of the camp.

These negative sentiments towards politics are commonplace in the city. One youth activist, a student in her early twenties called Victoria, said that Hong Kong people see politics as ‘啲污糟嘢’ (*di wuzao ye*, ‘something dirty’). The choice to use the word ‘污糟’ (*wuzao*, ‘dirty’) in association with politics carries significant implications in such a hygiene-conscious society, where public spaces and facilities are disinfected hourly, and where people wear surgical masks when they have a cold to avoid spreading germs. Firstly, this conceptual link between dirt and politics conveys how the latter is seen as something undesirable and potentially harmful to the individual, something to be purged. Secondly, emphasising the ‘dirty’ nature of politics carries connotations of pollution — not necessarily only addressing a sense of biological contamination, as seen in anthropological uses of the word in discussing frameworks of power and gender — but rather, also references a form of moral pollution (see Douglas 1984 [1966]: 3) that will result in an individual behaving in ways that stray from the accepted norms of mainstream society. In Hong Kong, those involved in politics are believed to acquire and possess combative traits, an impression reinforced by televised footage of the emotionally charged LegCo meetings amongst politicians, and of the physical scuffles between grassroots activists and the police during protests. Political individuals are thus construed as deviating from the template of the ideal Hong Kong citizen, who focuses on contributing to the economic domain and does not cause or court instability in the city. For example, returning to my interaction with the man in the business suit at Occupy Central, his choice to describe the occupiers as ‘useless’ and as having ‘too much time’ revealed his conceptualisation of these youths as idle entities

## DEFINING POLITICS IN AN 'APOLITICAL CITY'

who lacked purpose and did not use their time in a productive manner; by basing his comments around notions of productivity and purpose, this man is critiquing Occupy Central for its inability to facilitate and further the economic development of the city. For this man, the occupiers do not fit into his understandings of how the proper Hong Kong citizen should behave. The characteristics of this ideal Hong Kong citizen will be reviewed closely in the next section. It will be shown that this construct emerged (and came to be positioned in opposition to the political agent) as the result of colonial indoctrination in the previous centuries.

### **Origins of Political Apathy: Reviewing Colonial History**

Observations of political apathy in Hong Kong are not new. Since the 1970s, the city has been described as 'an urban polity relatively free from riots and political cleavages' (King 1975: 424), home to a politically passive population (Miners 1978 [1975]) that is 'apathetic about politics' (Harris 1978: 120), and whose members prefer to be the 'attentive spectators' of politics (Lau and Kuan 1995: 3). Some scholars believe this political disinterest stems from the 'refugee mentality' amongst migrants displaced to Hong Kong from China during the Chinese Civil War (1927-1950) and World War II (1939-1945), who were driven by an 'extraordinary concern to preserve social stability' in their new abode and therefore avoided becoming involved in local politics (Chan 1992: 108; see also Hoadley 1970; 1973). Other theories claim that political apathy stems from the Confucian heritage of the Hong Kong Chinese, who would resolve problems through private family networks rather than through mainstream political participation (Lau 1981), and would favour government-people relationships 'more parochial-subject than participant in nature' for the sake of maintaining a harmonious society (King 1975: 427). But these explanations attribute political apathy as being socio-culturally innate to the population, omitting the role of the colonial government in fostering such sentiments.

This section argues that the apolitical character witnessed in Hong Kong today is the product of colonial intervention throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Within colonial

societies, the British authorities actively shaped how the 'political domain' manifested in the locality by imposing specific structures of hierarchical governance and by establishing certain types of institutional bodies for schooling, health, and policing purposes (Spencer 1997: 4). In Hong Kong, the British colonial government was also influential in shaping political subjectivity, dictating how the local population viewed and felt towards politics. More specifically, the colonial administration instilled and fostered an apolitical political subjectivity through the systematic depoliticisation of Hong Kong society. This was accomplished by establishing government structures and regulations that prevented the Hong Kong Chinese from seeing themselves as having the capacity to become political actors (Faure 2003), but also by encouraging the population to willingly distance themselves from politics and instead focus on participating in the economic domain. The latter was achieved through practices of governmentality (Foucault 1980; 1991) where techniques of population control did not manifest solely as top-down impositions of laws and policies, but entered everyday life through institutions such as schools and hospitals. Through governmentality, the Hong Kong population were rendered into docile bodies that regulated their behaviours on behalf of the authorities, and were taught to conceptualise politics as being removed from the concerns of the everyday. For example, colonial schools in Hong Kong omitted political material in the curriculum,<sup>7</sup> and focussed on transforming students into skilled employees and labourers (Morris 1992), without questioning their socio-political realities (Wong 2009). Public speeches by colonial officials celebrated the economic accomplishments of the territory, and portrayed the city as a trading port devoid of political interests and problems (see Grantham 2012 [1965]). Colonial reinforcement of this conceptual division between the political and economic domains is best encapsulated by the implementation of positive non-interventionism in 1971, stipulating that everyday business ventures were to be free from

---

<sup>7</sup> During the first half of the twentieth century, to prevent the anti-colonial sentiments circulating in China from permeating into Hong Kong, the Hong Kong British colonial government depoliticised the local education system by introducing regulations stipulating that students engaged in political actions and political organisations were to be expelled from schools; that political ideologies, paraphernalia, and propaganda were forbidden from classrooms and in teaching materials; and that colonial and Chinese history and politics were not to be taught (see Bray and Lee 1993: 549). These education regulations were relaxed towards the end of the twentieth century, and were officially abolished in 1990.

## DEFINING POLITICS IN AN 'APOLITICAL CITY'

government intervention. In turn, political matters were to be left in the hands of the 'upper echelons' of colonial authority (Lui 2003: 173). By instilling values that advocated for the 'limited development of rights' with the 'prioritising of economic development' within the consciousness of the population, the colonial government had initiated a 'citizenship educating project' (Ku and Pun 2006: 2):

The [colonial] government attempted to prescribe a moral yardstick for the correct way of life for Hong Kong citizens, that is, an able-bodied person was expected to be working for industrialists and for the benefit of the Hong Kong economy... People are expected to maintain the market ... while political institutions are still in the hands of the elites and the civil servants in the higher echelons (Ho 2006: 28, 34).

This method of distancing the Hong Kong Chinese from the political domain was highly successful. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the population embraced their role as the apolitical *homo economicus* and were described as being 'content, for the most part, to accept the thin British layer of administration provided it does not concern them. What does concern them is that British administration should leave them alone, so that business and family life can prosper' (Harris 1978: 12). Provided that the colonial administration upheld law and order to ensure stability and protect livelihoods, 'people were happy to be left alone, to freely pursue career paths and goals' (Mathews et al. 2008: 35). Being able to control their financial wellbeing was deemed satisfactory by the Hong Kong Chinese despite the lack of control they had over their political lives. As Ackbar Abbas (2002 [1997]) observed in the days before the 1997 Handover<sup>8</sup> marking the end of British rule in the territory, the city's inhabitants appeared untroubled by the impending transition to Chinese sovereignty, and were content with their consumerist lifestyle, and in fostering market growth. In turn, Ngo Tak-Wing (2000) found that the Hong Kong public even considered economic participation a

---

<sup>8</sup> Hong Kong became a British colony in 1841, after the UK and the Qing dynasty of China signed the Treaty of Nanking to end the First Opium War (1839-1842). In 1984, representatives from Britain and the People's Republic of China (PRC) signed the Sino-British Joint Declaration to confirm that sovereignty over Hong Kong would be transferred from the UK to the PRC on 1 July 1997.

suitable alternative to – and even as equivalent with — political participation. Because of these societal attitudes, Lam Wai-man noted that Hong Kong people have consequently been portrayed as ‘economic animals’ (2004: 1), whereas Francis Lee and Joseph Chan commented that sociologists would claim that ‘Hong Kong citizens were in general “selfish”, and cared only about their private interests’ rather than wider socio-political problems (2011: 1).

Whilst political youths during my fieldwork believed that the Hong Kong population is disinterested in all matters pertaining to politics, and that the population conceptualises the economic and political domains as being separate and removed spheres, the reality is more complex. As noted above, the population was happy to focus on economic activities, leaving political problems to the colonial government as long as socio-economic stability was preserved in the city, and such sentiments have persisted even into the contemporary era. But this means that the political passivity of the population is contingent on the continued wellbeing of the economic domain. If the economic sphere fails to perform in accordance with societal expectations, or if livelihoods are threatened, the population will engage in political protest. It is in recognising this nuanced approach towards the political and economic spheres in Hong Kong that the paradox posed by the 2003 demonstration at the beginning of this paper can be resolved. Although the demonstration was triggered by the proposal of Article 23, this political outburst stemmed from economic considerations. Soon after the 1997 Handover, the Asian Financial Crisis occurred. For the first time in the living memory of the city, economic growth stalled, unemployment rates rose, and real estate prices plummeted. There was much public dissatisfaction towards how the SAR administration (mis)handled this economic downturn (Lui 2005; *The Economist* 2011). In other words, the Hong Kong population already harboured strong negative feelings towards the SAR government due to the difficult economic conditions that affected everyday livelihoods; the proposition of Article 23 was simply the spark that ignited these tensions, leading to the mass demonstration on 1 July 2003. So instead of completely distancing the population from politics, colonial techniques of depoliticisation actually fostered a form of public political involvement determined by societal perceptions of economic conditions. However, this also means that when the economy rebounds, public interest and involvement

## DEFINING POLITICS IN AN 'APOLITICAL CITY'

in politics diminishes. For example, immediately after 2003, the SAR government introduced measures to bring investments from the People's Republic of China (PRC) into the city, which lowered unemployment rates and increased GDP growth (So 2011), and demonstration turnout in Hong Kong has steadily decreased since then (HKU POP 2013), prompting youth activists to comment that the city continues to '唔關心' (*wu guanxin*, 'not care/to be uncaring') about politics today.

While the 2003 outburst showed that political apathy is not absolute in the city, it also revealed the veneration of economic ventures amongst the Hong Kong population. As a result, those posing a threat to this stability, such as activists and other political individuals trying to incite social change and reform government structures, are labelled by mainstream society as 'radicals, or troublemakers' (Lam 2004: 184) who must be ostracised (Leung 2000). For most Hong Kong people, the idealised image of the economically productive citizen is juxtaposed against the disruptive/destructive political individual. This oppositional framework (pitting economic engagement against political engagement) prevailed throughout the last decades of colonial rule and persists in the contemporary city, and is only beginning to be challenged in recent years, as seen from the debates that emerged during the 2014 Umbrella Movement about how the 'rule of law' principle should be interpreted and acted upon. These debates highlighted a clear ideological division in the city, because whilst youth activists and pro-democracy politicians argued that the 'rule of law' is where the populace ensures that the government powers are kept in check, in contrast, SAR officials conflate 'rule of law' with 'obey the law', whereby the population should abide by the authority of the governing institution (Piling and Zhu 2015). Much of the Hong Kong population agreed with the SAR government perspective, criticising the Umbrella Movement protesters for causing a massive disruption and inconvenience to their everyday livelihoods (thereby jeopardising the economic wellbeing of the entire city), and believing that they should just 'go home' (City Forum 2014; Zhao 2014). On a broader level, the 'rule of law' debates indicate that in Hong Kong society, there are now discrepant conceptualisations regarding how the Hong Kong person should be situated in relation to the political domain – whether the individual should passively accept their political realities as dictated by those

in power, or if they should actively assert political change and reform. In the next section, the tensions arising from such differing understandings of the Hong Kong person (as an economic agent or as a political agent) will be illustrated by the personal accounts of political youth informants, who detail the difficulties they face in their everyday social interactions.

### **The Difficulties of Being Political**

With a Hong Kong population that sees politics (and political actors) as something 'dirty' and disruptive, what difficulties do youth activists then face in their interactions with wider society? Activist youth informants' interactions with friends and family are marred by tensions, as the latter groups see political engagement as imbuing an individual with antisocial traits, transforming an individual into a figure that poses a threat to those around them. Such negative constructs of the political actor have affected the experiences of Victoria, who developed an interest in Hong Kong politics after watching the anti-XRL protests on the news in 2009 and 2010, and began participating in protest actions in 2011 after becoming a member of New Youth. New Youth is a small activist youth group that caught the attention of the local media by wearing Guy Fawkes masks to protests, and for their use of confrontational protest tactics (Tsoi 2011). Victoria had previously seen New Youth in televised news reports, but only met New Youth in person after one of her close friends introduced<sup>9</sup> her to the founding members of the group. Upon realising that she and the group shared similar political aspirations, Victoria decided to join New Youth and now helps the group with administrative tasks, and with organising and attending meetings with the

---

<sup>9</sup> Victoria used the word '介紹' (*jiieshao*, which translates to 'introduction' but can also be understood as 'recommendation'), to describe the process where unacquainted individuals are presented to each other through a mutual friend. Such introductions are an important feature of Hong Kong activist networks, helping to establish a sense of trust between individuals unfamiliar with each other. In February 2011, I made the mistake of attending a demonstration at the North Point Government Offices without having made prior arrangements to talk to the participating protesters. When I arrived at the government offices, two masked youth protesters were standing in front of the building. I approached them to explain my research intentions, but they only responded by sprinting across the street whilst tossing suspicious glances at me. I later learnt from political youth informants that protesters (including themselves) are suspicious of strangers, due to rumours of undercover police officers infiltrating protesting crowds as a means of gathering personal information on activists to facilitate future arrests.

DEFINING POLITICS IN AN 'APOLITICAL CITY'

local media to give public statements on behalf of the group. She also takes part in street protest marches.

But at the same time, Victoria attends an educational institution where political discussions are not encouraged on the premises. Having been at the institute for several years, Victoria noticed that although the school never explicitly forbade political dialogue amongst its staff and students, she suspected that her teachers deliberately shunned the topic of Hong Kong politics in the classroom to avoid the possibility of 'causing problems' with the school administrators. Likewise, the student body do not bring up political topics in their private conversations during break and lunch times, and also refrain from political involvement inside and outside of the school grounds (unlike, for example, the Chinese University of Hong Kong or the University of Hong Kong student unions, who are active in campus politics and in wider political contentions within the public sphere). Victoria therefore finds it difficult to talk about her activism at school, especially in the presence of her friends in class who are not interested in politics because it has previously resulted in her being ostracised. She remembers an incident when her New Youth membership was accidentally revealed by one of her close school friends, and several classmates subsequently began distancing themselves and 'shut all dialogue down' with her. Because of her political involvement, and particularly because of her affiliation with a 'radical' group like New Youth, Victoria believes that these schoolmates categorised her as a 'delinquent ... extreme character' seeking to cause societal unrest, and is therefore a person to be avoided. Interactions with these schoolmates became uncomfortable, and because of this, Victoria now keeps her political engagement separate from her school life, only engaging in political debates around her New Youth associates. Other activists similarly recalled being marginalised by their non-political peers once their political involvement was made evident. A young woman, a self-described 'OL' ('office lady') who I met at a demonstration in April 2011, said that she wouldn't tell her friends from work about her political participation because when she talked about it in the past, these friends 'didn't seem to like it too much ... they didn't know how to respond ... it was awkward'.



Interactions between activist youths and their parents also show how political participation is diametrically opposed to constructs of the ideal Hong Kong citizen in the popular mindset, as seen in Susie's narrative. Susie is a political youth in her final year of university, and is heavily involved in campus politics, recently having participated in a protest action denouncing the university administration for attempting to stifle the expressive rights of the student population. She currently lives with her parents, and described her family as being 'typically middle-class'; they live in an apartment within a private housing development and both parents have white-collar jobs, whilst Susie and her brother are in the process of obtaining higher education qualifications so that they can later attain respectable professional jobs. Susie finds it difficult to talk about her activism at home, because her parents consider politics to be irrelevant to their lives:

At home we don't like talking about politics [...] my mum never really pays attention to it, and my dad doesn't mention it. If he does talk about it, he has his own views that are normally different from ours [political youths]. Normally his views would be "don't stir up so much stuff, as long as you have a place to live and a job it is ok". He thinks politics is a waste of time. Politics is something that is further away, not very close to them.

Whilst Susie's mother is ambivalent towards politics, her father expresses strong negative sentiments towards political engagement. According to her father, an individual should only focus on securing employment, finding a flat to live in, and ensuring the financial wellbeing of their family. In describing political participation as a 'waste of time', her father's critique emphasised how such activities are unproductive – more specifically, how such activities are *economically* unproductive. His priorities are on acquiring a flat and having a source of income, neither goal being capable of fulfilment by becoming invested in the happenings of the political sphere. In his opinion, a person should be content with being an economic agent, not a political one. It is perhaps inevitable that having grown up in a domestic environment where political participation was frowned upon, Susie internalised her parents' feelings that activism carries negative connotations and is equated with

## DEFINING POLITICS IN AN 'APOLITICAL CITY'

'extremist individuals', affecting her political outlook — this can be seen in her reluctance to partake in Occupy Central (she considers this protest too 'extreme'), and her reluctance to identify herself as an activist. When I asked her why she distances herself from the 'activist' label despite her involvement in protest actions, she admitted that she 'just feels uncomfortable' with the term because 'it doesn't sound 正經 [zhengjing, good/proper]'.

When Susie does mention her involvement in protest actions at home, the differing views she and her parents hold towards her political participation have led to arguments. These arguments are never resolved, because neither side will yield to the opinion of the other. Susie found these disagreements unpleasant because she does not enjoy upsetting her parents, and to prevent these clashes from recurring, Susie now hides her political views and activities from the domestic sphere. For example, whenever she returns home from a protest, Susie tells her parents that she was only out meeting friends. Susie and her parents have developed a tolerance for their respective attitudes towards political issues that is not based on mutual understanding, but on mutual silence. Despite this 'arrangement' helping to maintain a somewhat peaceful relationship between Susie and her parents, Susie feels frustrated for having to compartmentalise her political life from her domestic life. She is also angry because she believes that even though she is protesting for democratic reforms and to preserve freedom of speech that will benefit the whole city, her parents do not acknowledge her efforts and offer her no emotional support. Experiencing these negative emotions does make Susie question her involvement in the political. Yet at the same time, her sense of righteous anger (Goodman et al. 2001) at the injustices she perceives in her everyday life and in society motivates her to persist with her activism.

Political youths such as Victoria and Susie concealed their activism to avoid causing tensions within their everyday social networks. Others strived to project a political problem or their political ideologies into the public domain by reframing them as seemingly innocuous lifestyle issues, effectively disguising the political aspects of their politics (of which the limited scope of this paper prevents an in-depth examination). Herein lies a problem: despite espousing a broad and encompassing definition of politics described earlier in the

paper, by compartmentalising their activism from their everyday intimate interactions and by presenting politics in an abstract non-political manner, these youths are unintentionally reinforcing the conceptual divide between the political, social, and economic spheres instilled by the colonial depoliticisation project decades ago. Anthropologists therefore need to be aware that how informants define politics may depart from how they actually practice politics.

### **Conclusion**

In Hong Kong, colonial intervention has produced entrenched sentiments of political apathy. But there are signs that Hong Kong's political culture is changing, as seen from the 2014 Umbrella Movement, where large numbers of people across the demographic spectrum, many of whom had never protested before and had once considered themselves to be non-political, partook in street occupations across the city. Even though the Umbrella Movement evoked polarised responses from wider society (some individuals supported the protests whilst others were vehemently against it) and was ultimately cleared away, the visual spectacle it created forced the population to acknowledge and confront the existence of political contestations in their everyday environs. The ideological gap between the political and the economic domains is gradually being bridged.

On the broader level, through an ethnographic study of the Hong Kong context, this paper has attempted to show that in researching politics, anthropologists should be aware of discrepant understandings of what the political entails amongst the local population (which may depart from academic understandings), warranting an examination of the historical processes that have shaped the fieldsite. By way of conclusion, this paper will posit questions with theoretical and methodological repercussions to consider: can anthropologists arrive in the field to study politics without attaining an understanding as to how their informants understand politics in the first place? How do local understandings of politics influence how contestations of power manifest at the institutional and grassroots

levels? And whose definition of politics should be given more legitimacy and significance in the research process, the informant's or the anthropologist's?

## About the Author

Sonia Lam-Knott completed her DPhil in anthropology at the University of Oxford, and is currently a postdoctoral fellow at the National University of Singapore. Her research interests revolve around urban environments and contestations, youth activism and subjectivity, along with Hong Kong politics. She can be contacted by email at [arilsyc@nus.edu.sg](mailto:arilsyc@nus.edu.sg).

## References

Abbas, Ackbar. 2002 [1997]. *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Arnett, Jeffrey Jenson. 2000. 'Emerging Adulthood: A Theory of Development from the Late-Teens through the Twenties.' *American Psychologist* 55(5), 469-480.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199929382.001.0001>.

Bray, Mark and W.O. Lee. 1993. 'Education, Democracy and Colonial Transition: The Case of Hong Kong', *International Review of Education* 39(6), 541-560.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01261536>.

Candea, Matei. 2011. '“Our Division of the Universe”: Making a Space for the Non-Political in the Anthropology of Politics', *Current Anthropology* 52(3), 309-334. <https://doi.org/10.1086/659748>.

Chan, Joseph Man. 1992. 'Mass Media and Socio-Political Formation, 1949-1992', *Asian Journal of Communication* 2(3), 106-129. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01292989209359564>.

Cheng, Joseph Y.S. 2005. 'Preface', in Joseph Y.S. Cheng (ed.). *The July 1 Protest Rally: Interpreting a Historic Event*, pp. xiii-xiv. Hong Kong: City University Press.

City Forum. 2014. 'Lunti: Yusanyundong gebanyue, tuichang yu fou zen dingduo?' [‘Topic: Umbrella Movement one month and a half later, to retreat or not?’] Radio Television Hong Kong, 8 November.

Available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LR6RA\\_koWr8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LR6RA_koWr8) (accessed 17 May 2017).

Deuber-Mankowsky, Astrid. 2008. 'Nothing is Political, Everything Can Be Politicised: On the Concept of the Political in Michel Foucault and Carl Schmitt', *Telos* 142, 135-161. <http://journal.telospress.com/content/2008/142/135.abstract>.

Douglas, Mary. 1984 [1966]. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis on the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd.

*The Economist*. 2011. 'Monsoon of their Discontent: An Annual Ritual Turns into an Expression of Grievances', 7 July. Available at: <http://www.economist.com/node/18929238> (accessed 13 March 2013).

Faure, David. 2003. *Colonialism and the Hong Kong Mentality*. Hong Kong: Centre of Asian Studies, The University of Hong Kong.

DEFINING POLITICS IN AN 'APOLITICAL CITY'

Foucault, Michel. 1980. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*. New York: Pantheon Books.

———. 1991. 'Governmentality', in Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller (eds.). *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, pp. 87-104. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Grantham, Alexander. 2012 [1965]. *Via Ports: From Hong Kong to Hong Kong*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

Goodman, Jeff, James M. Jasper, and Francesca Poletta. 2001. 'Introduction: Why Emotions Matter', in Jeff Goodman, James M. Jasper, and Francesca Poletta (eds.). *Passionate Politics: Emotions and Social Movements*, pp. 1-26. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Harris, Peter. 1978. *Hong Kong: A Study in Bureaucratic Politics*. London: Heinemann Educational Books Limited.

Heywood, Andrew. 2013. *Politics*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Ho, Denny Kwok-Leung. 2006. 'Citizenship as a Form of Governance', in Agnes Shuk-mei Ku and Pun Ngai (eds.). *Remaking Citizenship in Hong Kong: Community, Nation and the Global City*, pp. 19-36. New York: Routledge.

Hoadley, J. Stephen. 1970. '"Hong Kong is the Lifeboat": Notes on Political Culture and Socialisation', *Journal of Oriental Studies* 8, 206-218.

———. 1973. 'Political Participation of the Hong Kong Chinese: Patterns and Trends', *Asian Survey* 13(6), 604-616. <https://doi.org/10.1525/as.1973.13.6.01p0343w>.

Hong Kong University Public Opinion Programme (HKUPOP). 2013. '*Gangda minyan gongbu qiyiyouxing renshu diansuan jieguo*'. ['University of Hong Kong poll releases results on the number of attendees at the 1 July demonstrations'.] Available at: <http://hkupop.hku.hk/english/release/release1050.html> (accessed 3 July 2013).

Honwana, Alcinda. 2012. *The Time of Youth: Work, Social Change, and Politics in Africa*. Sterling, VA: Kumarian Press.

Juris, Jeffrey S. 2008. *Networking Futures: The Movements against Corporate Globalisation*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

King, Ambrose Yeo-chi. 1975. 'Administrative Absorption of Politics in Hong Kong: Emphasis on the Grass Roots Level', *Asian Survey* 15(5), 422-439.  
<https://doi.org/10.1525/as.1975.15.5.01p0076b>.

Ku, Agnes Shuk-mei. 2009. 'Civil Society's Dual Impetus: Mobilisations, Representations and Contestations over the 1 July March in 2003', in Ming Sing (ed.). *Politics and Government in Hong Kong: Crisis under Chinese Sovereignty*, pp. 38-57. London: Routledge.

Ku, Agnes Shuk-mei and Ngai Pun. 2006. 'Introduction: Remaking Citizenship in Hong Kong' in Agnes Shuk-mei Ku and Ngai Pun (eds.). *Remaking Citizenship in Hong Kong: Community, Nation and the Global City*, pp. 1-16. New York: Routledge.

Lam, Wai-man. 2004. *Understanding the Political Culture of Hong Kong: The Paradox of Activism and Depoliticization*. New York: M.E. Sharpe Inc.

———. 2012. 'Political Identity, Culture, and Participation', in Wai-man Lam, Percy Luen-tim Lui, and Wilson Wong (eds.). *Contemporary Hong Kong Government and Politics*, pp. 199-222. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

DEFINING POLITICS IN AN 'APOLITICAL CITY'

Lau, Siu-kai. 1981. 'Chinese Familism in an Urban-Industrial Setting: The Case of Hong Kong', *Journal of Marriage and Family* 43(4), 977-992. <https://doi.org/10.2307/351353>.

Lau, Siu-kai, and Hsin-chi Kuan. 1995. 'The Attentive Spectators: Political Participation of the Hong Kong Chinese', *Journal of Northeast Asian Studies* 14(1), 3-24. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF03023285>.

Lee, Francis L.F. and Joseph M. Chan. 2008. 'Making Sense of Participation: The Political Culture of Pro-Democracy Demonstrators in Hong Kong', *The China Quarterly* 193, 84-101. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0305741008000052>.

———. 2011. *Media, Social Mobilisation, and Mass Protest in Post-Colonial Hong Kong: The Power of a Critical Protest*. London: Routledge.

Lee, Ming-Kwan. 1998. 'Hong Kong Identity—Past and Present', in Siu-Lun Wong and Toyojiro Maruya (eds.). *Hong Kong Economy and Society: Challenges in the New Era*, pp. 153-175. Tokyo: Centre of Asian Studies, University of Hong Kong and Institute of Developing Economies.

Leung, Benjamin K.P. 2000. 'The Student Movement in Hong Kong: Transition to a Democratizing Society', in Stephen Wing Kai Chiu and Tai-lok Lui (eds.). *The Dynamics of Social Movement in Hong Kong*, pp. 209-226. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

Lewellen, Ted C. 2003. *Political Anthropology: An Introduction*. Westport: Praeger Publishing.

Lui, Tai-lok. 2003. 'Rearguard Politics: Hong Kong's Middle Class', *The Developing Economies* XLI(2), 161-183. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1746-1049.2003.tb00936.x>.



———. 2005. 'Under Fire: Hong Kong's Middle Class After 1997', in Joseph Y.S. Cheng (ed.). *The July 1 Protest Rally: Interpreting a Historic Event*, pp. 277-302. Hong Kong: City University of Hong Kong Press.

Mathews, Gordon, Eric Kit Wah Ma, and Tai-lok Lui. 2008. *Hong Kong, China: Learning to be a Nation*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Miller, Eugene. 1980. 'What Does "The Political" Mean?', *The Review of Politics* 42(1), 56-72. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670500030783>.

Miners, Norman. 1978 [1975]. *The Government and Politics of Hong Kong*. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press.

Morris, Paul. 1992. 'Preparing Pupils as Citizens of the Special Administrative Region of Hong Kong: An Analysis of Curriculum Change and Control During the Transition Period', in G.A. Postiglione (ed.). *Education and Society in Hong Kong: Toward One Country and Two Systems*, pp. 117-145. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

Mouffe, Chantal. 1995. 'Politics, Democratic Action, and Solidarity', *Inquiries: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy* 38(1/2), 99-108. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00201749508602377>.

———. 2005. *On the Political*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Ngo, Tak-Wing. 2000. 'Social Values and Consensual Politics in Colonial Hong Kong', in Hans Antlov and Tak-Wing Ngo (eds.). *The Cultural Construction of Politics in Asia*, pp. 131-153. Surrey: Curzon.

DEFINING POLITICS IN AN 'APOLITICAL CITY'

Nigam, Aditya. 2008. 'The Implosion of "The Political"', *Journal of Contemporary Thought* 27, Summer, 51-70. Reposted on *Critical Encounters: A Forum of Critical Thought from the Global South*. Available at: <http://criticalencounters.net/2009/05/14/the-implosion-of-%E2%80%98the-political%E2%80%99/> (accessed 22 April 2015).

Ong, Aihwa. 1987. *Spirits of Resistance and Capitalist Discipline: Factory Women in Malaysia*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Özyürek, Ezra. 2006. *Nostalgia for the Modern: State Secularism and Everyday Politics in Turkey*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Piling, David and Julie Zhu. 2015. 'Hong Kong Tussles over "Rule of Law"', *Financial Times*, 14 January. Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/36c76598-9bcd-11e4-a6b6-00144feabdc0> (accessed 10 May 2017).

Sing, Ming and Yuen-sum Tang. 2012. 'Mobilisations and Conflicts over Hong Kong's Democratic Reform', in Wai-man Lam, Percy Luen-tim Lui, and Wilson Wong (eds.). *Contemporary Hong Kong Government and Politics: Extended Second Edition*, pp. 137-158. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

Spencer, Jonathan. 1997. 'Post-Colonialism and the Political Imagination', *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 3(1), 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3034362>.

So, Alvin Y. 2011. 'The Development of Post-Modernist Movements in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region', in Jeffrey Broadbent and Vicky Brockman (eds.). *East Asian Social Movements: Power, Protest, and Change in a Dynamic Region*, pp. 365-378. London: Springer Science + Business Media.

Tsoi, Grace. 2011. 'Protestors Unmasked', *HK Magazine*, 22 September. Available at: <http://hk.asia-city.com/city-living/article/protesters-unmasked> (accessed 1 July 2013).

Vincent, Joan. 2002. 'Introduction', in Joan Vincent (ed.). *The Anthropology of Politics: A Reader in Ethnography, Theory, and Critique*, pp. 1-14. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Wong, Kacey. 2009. 'Chatting with Artists, WONG Kwok chi, Kacey', interview by C&G Artpartment, published in *C&G Artpartment*. Hong Kong: C&G Artpartment.

Zhao, Shirley. 2014. 'More than Two-Thirds Say Occupiers Should Go Home as Support Wanes: Poll', *South China Morning Post*, 17 November. Available at: <http://www.scmp.com/print/news/hong-kong/article/1641583/survey-confirms-occupy-central-generation-gap-hong-kong> (accessed 10 May 2017).