

Hong Kong vs Goliath: Hong Kong's pro-democracy movement and the old tactic of boycotts

With Canto-pop star Denise Ho and bookseller-turned-whistleblower Lam Wing-kee, Hong Kong's pro-democracy movement put the old tactic of boycotts to new use.



On Sunday, 19th June 2016, Hong Kong-based musician Denise Ho [sang](#) for her fans at a special concert on Po Hing Fong, a street in the upscale, artsy Hong Kong neighbourhood “PoHo”. At the same time and in the same place, a bigger show sponsored by the French-owned international brand Lancôme was supposed to take place, but it did not – the cosmetics maker got cold feet about being involved in anything associated with the bleached-haired, controversial Canto-pop star. The ersatz concert had an upbeat, relaxed feel despite all the drama that unfolded earlier. Ho’s fans, most of them supporters of her pro-democracy stance, which was rare for a local celebrity, packed the streets of PoHo, where art galleries and artisanal shops dot the steep-sloped, gentrified alleys.

Ho’s concert was one of a pair of events that took place between two politically charged dates that are commemorated without fail each year in Hong Kong: the anniversary of the 4th June massacre of 1989, and 1st July, which marks the date of the 1997 Handover that made Hong Kong a specially administered part of the People’s Republic of China. Five days before Ho’s concert,

missing Hong Kong bookseller and publisher Lam Wing-kee returned to Hong Kong with a surprising story of his fate. Unexpected and very different in nature, these developments were linked together by one important thing, which also ties them to the protests of 2012 and 2014 that [made](#) Joshua Wong first locally and then globally famous: they were both stirring tales of underdogs facing off against powerful foes – updated, secular, Asia-set variations on the biblical story of David versus Goliath.

A Tale of Two Underdogs

Denise Ho was a popular singer-songwriter, a high-profile LGBT activist, and an award-winning actress. She was also a familiar face in her native Hong Kong, due partly to the many billboards that use her to advertise brands such as Levi's "Roadwear" collection and, until she was dropped by the company, Listerine's mouthwash products. She [was](#) a vocal supporter of the 2014 Umbrella Movement and met the Dalai Lama – two things that have made her unpopular with the Chinese Communist Party. Ho was subsequently banned from performing on the mainland and international businesses had to weigh the pros and cons of being linked to her in a new light.

Ho's dizzyingly diverse résumé goes on, and eventually came to include her becoming a boycott symbol. After an official Beijing tabloid slammed Lancôme for associating themselves with the singer and suggested that Chinese people could show their patriotism by shunning the company's products, the company backed out of the concert. Ho was quick to criticise the company's decision to call off the multi-act Hong Kong gig that was to include her, calling it an act of "commercial self-censorship". (China became parent company L'Oréal's second biggest market in 2015.)

One response to what some [dubbed](#) Lancôme's "kowtowing" to Beijing was a call to boycott the now-back-in-Beijing's-good-graces cosmetic giant. But despite expressions of support for the boycott in Hong Kong and elsewhere (including in France, where a pro-boycott petition [circulated](#)), many in Hong Kong remained uninterested or simply were not ready to get behind the singer. Even some of the small businesses that were cross-promoted at the concert tried to distance themselves from Ho-the-political-symbol while working with Ho-the-entertainer. They denied that they endorsed her positions and said they took part only for the good publicity the famous performer could bring to the neighbourhood.

Ho's emergence as an unexpected underdog standing up to a Beijing government whose vast security apparatus and ever-growing global economic clout give it a Goliath-like stature made some headlines, but not as many as Lam Wing-kee did with an impromptu press conference he held right between the contentious anniversaries.

Lam, a bookseller-turned-whistleblower who went missing in October 2015, [made](#) a stunning set of revelations, claiming that he had been kidnapped and detained in China, not gone there willingly as the mainland press has insisted. He [offered](#) a chilling account of being abducted that his former colleagues and a woman identifying as his girlfriend quickly [disputed](#) (some of them in an

“exclusive” interview with the pro-Beijing *Sing Tao Daily*).

Among the five employees connected to publisher Mighty Current Media and its bookshop Causeway Bay Books, which specialise in salacious and lightly sourced titles about China’s ruling elite, Lam was the only one to have spoken critically about the quintet’s mysterious individual disappearances into detention across the Chinese border. He was also the only one of the five to claim that all televised confessions by members of the group were, as many international journalists have assumed all along, scripted and coerced.

Lam was due to lead the 1st July pro-democracy march at the handover anniversary in 2016. But he decided to pull out after having perceived “serious threats” to his personal safety. Still, tens of thousands of protesters took to the streets – though the turnout was not considered high compared to that of previous years.

Banned books and beauty cream

Whether the objects involved were behind-the-scenes books or cosmetics, it seemed politicised products with direct or indirect ties to Hong Kong’s eroding autonomy were becoming particularly freighted with meaning in 2016. The year’s major anniversaries lacked obvious oomph – in contrast to the quarter-century anniversary of the 4th June massacre in 2014 and the 20th anniversary of the handover that was to be held in 2017 – and the pro-democracy movement [appeared](#) to have become somewhat divided and disoriented, with a proliferation of voices urging everything from political reform to independence often seeming more frustratingly fragmented than constructively diverse. And yet, these products and the debates swirling around them ensured that 2016 would be remembered as a significant year in the history of Hong Kong’s relationship to the mainland. They also came on the heels of two events involving the arts earlier in 2016 that were similarly revealing of tensions within the city and anxieties over its future.

These involved an art installation and a film. Appearing on the façade of Hong Kong’s tallest skyscraper, a nine-minute light installation – in which an animated, random number blinked for a few moments in the end – began as what seemed and perhaps was an apolitical work associated with time. Only later, a day after the installation’s debut, did its subversive creators reveal what that number represented – a countdown by the second to 1st July 2047, to convey that time was running out for Hong Kong. (Hong Kong is to be fully integrated with China when its “one country, two systems” arrangement with Beijing expires on 1st July 2047.) The film, by contrast, was neither ambitious in meaning nor ever seen as apolitical. Titled “Ten Years”, it was comprised of five segments, in each of which a local director imagined, darkly, what Hong Kong would be like a decade hence. When it was nominated for a Hong Kong film award in the spring of 2016, the mainland media, predicting that it would win prizes (they were right), [reversed](#) its plans to broadcast the awards show live.

For the historically minded, the back and forth boycotts linked to Denise Ho’s Lancôme face-off,

while they made headlines only briefly, were at least as interesting as any of the 2016 events that got more intense and sustained coverage. The boycott pushing against Beijing's attacks on Ho highlighted a broad question that confronted many social movements: What kind of weapons of the weak can have purchase against the economically powerful? It also sparked a more local question for Hong Kong: How can acts of resistance gain traction and any kind of global support in light of a growth surge that has turned China from an impoverished David into a Goliath-like juggernaut that international governments and companies often feel worried about offending? When we talk about the power of ordinary people and consumers, how can the island city's population of 7.2 million compete with the mainland's 1.4 billion?

Underdogs Past, Underdogs Present

It may seem strange to invoke an Old Testament story when referring to a conflict involving the avowedly atheistic Communist Party, but it is fitting for two reasons. First, Mao Zedong and his successors showed a great fondness for using just these sorts of tales to bolster their legitimacy. Mainland youths grew up reading stories about and watching films that presented revolutionaries of old boldly defying the odds and taking on adversaries who are much better armed, much better funded, or both – and managing to score significant victories or at least hold their ground surprisingly well.

The 4th May Movement of 1919, which included an anti-Japanese boycott, and the 30th May Movement of 1925, during which the public was told to refrain from buying both British and Japanese goods, were both narrated this way, as was a 1905 struggle involving a boycott of American products that was launched to combat discriminatory U.S. immigration policies. So, too, were the Long March and the Communist defeat of the Nationalists in 1949. In each case, the tale was told of seemingly outmatched patriots, intent on protecting their community and making creative use of weapons of the weak, from general strikes to guerrilla warfare, standing their ground and sometimes gaining stunning victories over seemingly all-powerful imperialist or autocratic opponents.

One reason Hong Kong protests were so displeasing to the authorities in Beijing was that, like some mainland acts of resistance, they inverted this Maoist mythology and put the old tactic of boycotts to new use. It was those who challenged the Communist Party, not supported it, who seemed to most closely resemble the David-like figures celebrated in mainland history books. It was Beijing that was cast as autocratic and in a sense imperialistic, exerting control over Hong Kong via puppets, and even, in the case of the disappearing booksellers, literally reaching into the territory with nefarious goals. In addition, some of the tactics that Hong Kong opponents of Beijing used, from Umbrella Movement mass sit-ins to the proposed L'Oreal boycott, were the exact same ones that heroes whose exploits were celebrated on the mainland employed before 1949.

The Hong Kong underdog who remained best known beyond the city itself was Joshua Wong. A Christian, he [told](#) interviewers that his parents chose his first name with an Old Testament tale of a

bold resister in mind, albeit one associated with wall shattering trumpets rather than a slingshot. In addition, though this youthful 19-year-old activist came to be associated with the leading role he played in the Umbrella Movement of 2014, he first rose to prominence via a 2012 fight linked to textbooks. In that earlier struggle, Wong joined with fellow teenagers, their teachers, and other sympathetic elders, to combat the importation into Hong Kong of mainland style patriotic education.

The textbooks in question, which the 2012 protesters were determined to keep out of Hong Kong schools, left out all mention of the 1989 Tank Man, one of the signature underdog figures of the last century. The underdogs they did feature, by contrast, were pro-Communist ones, like the People's Liberation Army fighters credited with miraculously driving Chiang Kai-shek's better armed, American-funded Nationalists into exile. Needless to say, while Hong Kong students could be told in classes, at least in 2016, about the bold, if only sometimes successful, efforts by David-figures like Joshua Wong and Denise Ho to stand up to the might of Beijing, there was no place for positive discussion of them in mainland schools or mainland media.

Politicised Products

From perfumes to cigarettes, China's advertising and consumer culture that flourished early in the 20th century was married to patriotism. Boycotts became an enduring protest tradition. "Enemy products" – whether from the United States in 1905, Japan in 1919, or sometimes other countries or a mix of nations—were rejected, and national, home-grown ones were championed. Efforts to strengthen and unify a nation crippled by foreign powers were projected onto commodities that ordinary people could access. While patriotism remained a potent force in China, the nation's embrace of consumerism generally moved away from politics. On the other hand, Hong Kong, a long-standing shopping destination, began to grapple with an increasingly politicised material culture.

It seemed in this altered landscape that there was little left to stay neutral about and few referent points stayed fixed for long. One needed to adjust continually in a setting where Hong Kongers could call for a boycott of a French beauty brand right after the same company was targeted by a mainland media organ whose editors saw in its face cream a new "enemy product" to attack. (That publication now has recordings by Lady Gaga on its sites after the American superstar [met](#) the Dalai Lama at a panel about kindness and compassion.) In this era of battling boycotts, many categories of the past got twisted around. In the tiny and geopolitically sensitive economy of Hong Kong, for example, referring to "the Left" evoked images of a top-down, Leninist-style operation rather than of class struggle and progressive politics. We also get used to seeing ordinary residents and consumers rallying to new kinds of songs, from Umbrella Movement anthems to Denise Ho hits, and gathering on newly resonant dates, such as 1st July, to battle a new kind of Goliath. Yet, they would perhaps continue to find value in using the same weapons of the weak as earlier generations of David-like Chinese figures, who battled bullies associated with capitals much further away than Beijing.

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