

Imagining a City-Based Democracy

Review of *The Appearing Demos: Hong Kong During and After the Umbrella Movement* by Laikwan Pang, University of Michigan Press, 2020

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In the past five to six years, Hong Kong has gone through a drastic change. Six years ago, after the end of the Umbrella Movement, people resumed normal lives. It was hardly to be imagined that another large-scale social movement would occur within a decade. However, because of the extradition law proposed by the government, that is precisely what happened in 2019. The situation is changing on a daily basis; intellectual responses may already look dated at the time they are published. Yet, Laikwan Pang's attempt at theorization and dialogue with Hannah Arendt's philosophy, *The Appearing Demos: Hong Kong During and After the Umbrella Movement*,¹ maintains its freshness, providing fruitful intellectual resources for readers to rethink the current situation of Hong Kong.

The book can be divided into three parts. First, it positions the Umbrella Movement against the context of the Occupy Movement in the first decade of the new century. What Pang finds in common is not only the form of occupation but also the intersubjectivity behind the apparent form (i.e., the bonding of individuals to form a community during collective political actions and protests). Her major concern in this part is to investigate how these individuals' exercise of autonomy and mutual respect can bring a new connectivity into being, one that denies the neoliberalist connectivity that continually morphs along with market conditions.

Second, through interviews of participants of the movement, combined with Pang's own observations, the book attempts to delineate what happened. Pang interviews several dozen protesters with different ages, genders, occupations, and educational backgrounds. They include secondary-school students, university students, design students, a group of boys' love (BL) fans,² documentary and feature-film directors, a female

1. See Laikwan Pang, *The Appearing Demos: Hong Kong During and After the Umbrella Movement* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020).

2. *Yaoi*, also known as boys' love or BL, is a genre of fictional media originating in Japan that features homoerotic relationships between male characters.

dancer and choreographer, an old farmer who used to live and work in the rural part of Hong Kong, and a grandmother who stayed in the occupation area throughout the movement. Through these interviews, Pang is able to delineate the confusion and endurance of the protestors. With the information provided by the BL fans, Pang is able to explain how their desires and fascinations could mobilize them to participate in the movement. By incorporating design students' self-expression into her account, Pang is able to conceptualize why the functional desks and ladders that appeared in the occupation areas can be recognized as works of art. Through her observation of the dance performances that took place in the areas of occupation, Pang is able to put forward the political significance of the events that involved spectators and participants as active political subjects. Based on her detailed analysis of the documentaries about the movement, Pang is able to theorize the notion of potentiality for imagining and actualizing the future through the recorded past in moving images.

Third, Pang attempts to offer a more macroscopic analysis of the political situation of Hong Kong, discussing the notions of right to the city, of liberty and freedom, and of rule of law. One of the difficult questions Pang seeks to deal with here is whether a city-based democracy is possible. She highlights the conflict between city-based democracy and the primacy of state sovereignty. This is the conflict the Hong Kong people have been witnessing and experiencing since the handover of sovereignty in 1997. The Mainland China government always regards Hong Kong's city-based democracy as a threat to unification, and thus the Umbrella Movement can be considered a symptom of this forced identification and unification. By underlining the differences between Arendt's "political life" (*bio politikos*) and Michel Foucault's "biopolitics," Pang once again confirms Arendt's politics of appearance by theorizing the individual political actor as a political subject. This political subject raises questions and brings challenges to the state concerning whether heterogeneity is allowed under sovereignty. Finally, Pang sincerely hopes that the people of Mainland China can perceive the heterogeneity of Hong Kong as an encouragement to engage in more alternative political imaginations instead of interpreting these prodemocratic efforts as direct insults to them.

The author vigorously creates a theoretical framework in dialogue with Arendt. Pang explicitly states in the introduction that her approach is grounded in the thought of Arendt; she also indicates that the notion of "politics of appearance" is mainly derived from Arendt's philosophy. It is not hard to discover, for example, how Arendt influences Pang's interrogation of the arts. Pang paraphrases Arendt's three dimensions of human activities—labor, work, and action—to discuss artistic practices in the occupation area of the Umbrella Movement. By reworking Edward Said's concept of traveling theory, Pang justifies her appropriation of Arendt's theory and philosophy.

Yet, in addition to the explicit and self-conscious use of Arendt's theory, I want to point out other implicit but equally important theoretical resources of the book. The

first concerns its title, *Appearing Demos*. As for “appearing,” the author notes that it is drawn from Arendt. But what about the notion of demos? Pang mentions more than once in the book and elsewhere that the notion of demos is mainly based on Wendy Brown’s *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution*. Brown suggests that neoliberalism vigorously tears apart the demos, dispatching the demos back to the individual and private level: “The neoliberal triumph of *homo oeconomicus* as the exhaustive figure of the human is undermining democratic practices and a democratic imaginary by vanquishing the subject that governs itself through moral autonomy and governs with others through popular sovereignty.”³ This description fits perfectly the situation of a neoliberalist city like Hong Kong, where people are reduced to *homo oeconomicus* while their political subjectivity is continually diminishing. Yet, in the Umbrella Movement, the dispatched demos unexpectedly appeared and occupied a space. This triggers Pang to reinterrogate the notion of demos against the situation of Hong Kong and to put forward the concept of an “appearing demos.” Apart from the theorization of demos, we can see Brown’s influence in how Pang conceptualizes the latter part of *The Appearing Demos*: Brown discusses political rationality and governance, law and legal reason, and educating human capital in the second part of her book while Pang raises questions about the concepts of right to the city, of liberty, and of rule of law.

Meanwhile, the notion of “appearing” has its own origin in the Hong Kong context. The most crucial reference point should be Ackbar Abbas’s *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*.⁴ Published in the year of the handover of sovereignty from Britain to China, this seminal work discussed Hong Kong cultural identity as a simultaneous process of *appearing* and *disappearing*, a cultural characteristic that can be found in many visual art forms such as cinema and architecture, as well as in writings of Hong Kong. Abbas suggests that the reason for the emergence of “Hong Kong” is because of its imminent disappearance in the process of nationalization. The influence of this book can still be observed today. In response to this thread of cultural discussion, Pang proposes that twenty years after the handover, Hong Kong has not yet entirely been absorbed into nationalization, has not yet disappeared, and does not appear through its disappearance. Rather, a large number of people actively appear in large-scale social movements, and by this means Hong Kong people redefine Hong Kong itself and reject nationalization as it is unfolding in the territory.

This narration of the Hong Kong story from the perspective of transition from disappearance to appearance can also be found in Jeffrey Wasserstrom’s *Vigil: Hong Kong on the Brink*. Wasserstrom entitles his introduction “Disappearance,” starting his story of Hong Kong from his observation that “the distinction between Hong Kong and

3. Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015), 79.

4. Ackbar Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

mainland China is disappearing.”⁵ Later, he examines several large-scale social movements, especially the Umbrella Movement in 2014 and Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement in 2019, to argue how Hong Kong evolves from “Negotiations” (chapter 2) to “Battles” (chapter 5). This example illuminates how the notion of disappearance influences our discussion of post-1997 Hong Kong and highlights how Pang’s “appearing demos” can be understood as a response to “the politics of disappearance.”

Another important reference point is Manuel Castells’s *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age*. Castells investigates several occupying movements of the past decade, from Tunisia to Egypt, from the Arab Spring to Occupy Wall Street. He discovers how outrage and hope galvanize the people in these social movements. Of Occupy Wall Street he says, “The movement surged as a largely spontaneous expression of *outrage*. It was infused with *hope* for a better world, which began to materialize in the daily life of the camps, in the dialogue and cooperation of social networks, and in the courageous street demonstrations where the bonding was enacted.”⁶ These lines capture the Umbrella Movement described in Pang’s book. From the interviews of protestors Pang conducts in *The Appearing Demos*, one can easily discover their outrage and their hopes. Yet, the relationship between the two books does not stop at this point. What concerns Castells most in his book—social movements in the Internet age—also constitutes the most significant part of Pang’s book.

Castells concentrates on the role of the Internet in recent social movements. He suggests that the Internet provides people with a new institutional public space: “By constructing a free community in a symbolic place, social movements create a public space, a space for deliberation, which ultimately becomes a political space, a space for sovereign assemblies to meet and to recover their rights of representation, which have been captured in political institutions predominantly tailored for the convenience of the dominant interests and values.”⁷ One can easily identify a similar role played by the Internet in the Umbrella Movement. Yet, where Pang differs from Castells is that Pang interviews several dozen participants of the Umbrella Movement; this gives her a rich and firsthand ground for her analysis. She records on the one hand the “outrage and hope” of the participants, an aspect that has been discussed by Castells. On the other hand, Pang also documents the self-suspicion, reservations, hesitation, and stagnancy of the protestors, the affects and desires that Castells may not have been able to discover through his reading of secondary texts and materials. This is one of the most precious parts of *The Appearing Demos*: the interviews provide more details about the varied

5. Jeffrey Wasserstrom, *Vigil: Hong Kong on the Brink* (New York: Columbia Global Reports, 2020), 16.

6. Manuel Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), 187. My emphasis.

7. Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope*, 11.

identities of the protestors while also explaining the complexity of feeling the protestors carried throughout the movement.

The Appearing Demos comprehensively analyzes what was happening during and after the Umbrella Movement with the help of information provided by protestors from different generations, genders, educational backgrounds, and social statuses. Yet, it omits a crucial aspect of the movement—the difficult lives of Hong Kong people in this extremely neoliberal and capitalist city. Recent studies have attempted to conceptualize this living situation in the new millennium by the notion of precarity. For example, Guy Standing suggests in *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* that the term can be used to designate people living with the perils of neoliberalism.⁸ Although the major demand of the Umbrella Movement was a request for universal suffrage, one should not forget that most of the participants led such precarious lives in Standing's terms.

Here, Victor Fan's discussion on the documentaries about the Umbrella Movement sheds light. In designating the 2010s as "the age of precarity," Fan explains that the older generations in Hong Kong call many millennials and post-millennials *faicing*, meaning that these young people are "wasted, disabled and disqualified, abandoned and ostracised, rendered useless and hopeless, and anti-social."⁹ In fact, they have lost their social mobility, are stigmatized by the older generations, and comprise the lowest of society even though they usually have better qualifications and educational background than their seniors. One may wonder how this precarious situation can play a part in the understanding of the Umbrella Movement. It is the question *The Appearing Demos* did not ask; it awaits future studies to be answered.

8. Standing Guy, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011).

9. Victor Fan, *Extraterritoriality: Locating Hong Kong Cinema and Media* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 201.