“Hong-Kong Style Cultural Revolution” — Weaponization of the Cultural Revolution in the 2019 Hong Kong Protests

Yat Fung
Yale University

Follow this and additional works at: https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/yurj

Part of the Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons

Recommended Citation
Fung, Yat (2020) ""Hong-Kong Style Cultural Revolution" — Weaponization of the Cultural Revolution in the 2019 Hong Kong Protests," The Yale Undergraduate Research Journal: Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 31. Available at: https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/yurj/vol1/iss1/31
The pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong started in June 2019 received international attention as clashes prolonged. A peculiar phenomenon has been observed in the textual space of both the pro-democracy camp and the pro-government camp, which is a shared set of terms surrounding the Chinese Cultural Revolution amid the camps’ antagonism. This essay thus investigates the comparisons between either the pro-democracy protests or the pro-government movement, with the Cultural Revolution, made by Hong Kong writers who position differently in the political spectrum. This essay aims to analyze the use of the Cultural Revolution as an idiomatic weapon to attack the opposing camp to draw insights to both Hong Kong’s perception of the Cultural Revolution and the characteristics of the current protests. The border goal of the essay is to show how the Cultural Revolution’s impact is still echoing.

I.

The on-going pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong have lasted for half a year by now and show no sign of termination. In June 2019, the protests were sparked by the opposition to the extradition bill, which would have permitted extradition to mainland China, leading to worries that Hong Kong’s autonomy would be undermined by exposing the locals to the legal system of mainland China. While the protesters claim their rights in defending the democratic system of the city against the Chinese authority, their opponents denounce their ideals and their actions for damaging the city’s socio-economic stability.

The antagonism between the pro-democracy camp and the pro-government camp constructs two completely different sets of vocabulary adopted by the media of the opposing camps. However, a set of terms can be found in the textual space of both camps — the Cultural Revolution. The Cultural Revolution, a socio-political movement initiated by Mao Zedong in China from 1966 to 1976, resulted in a “severe setback of China culture and social development”. Both camps in the current Hong Kong society employ terms specifically tied to the Cultural Revolution to draw direct analogies to the on-going situation, the general social ambiance, as well as particular actions of individuals and parties. This shared application of vocabulary not only poses a peculiar case due to the polarization of the language in the current protests, but also due to the sensitive nature of the Cultural Revolution, which has been a taboo for the Communist Party of China (CPC).

Comparisons between the pro-democracy protests or the pro-government counter-protests, with the Cultural Revolution, made by Hong Kong writers who position differently in the political spectrum, thus worth our investigation. This essay aims to analyze the use of the Cultural Revolution as a rhetorical device by Hong Kong people in online media platforms to draw insights on locals’ perception of the Cultural Revolution. This essay suggests that the use of the Cultural Revolution as an idiomatic weapon to attack the opposing camp reveals Hong Kong people’s multilayer conceptions of the Cultural Revolution, which continues to play a role in the current society.

II.

During the Cultural Revolution, Mao mobilized the
mass to consolidate his leadership in the party and revive the revolutionary spirit by struggling against party enemies, overthrowing local authorities, and destroying traditional relics. Factory productions halted and schools were closed amid a stateless and lawless society. Student organizations known as the Red Guards were mobilized by Mao to catalyze terror by going on a rampage, destroying state property and beating up people. Local factions divided by political differences and personal vendetta had large-scale militant clashes. It resulted in millions of death, socio-political chaos, and permanent loss of historical artifacts.

The Cultural Revolution spilled over the Shenzhen border to Hong Kong, which had been under British colonial rule since 1841. While many Mainlanders escaped to Hong Kong from the chaos and gained residency from the loose immigration policy, communists and their supporters in the crown colony rallied and put up “big-character posters” to stand in solidarity with their Mainland counterparts. In May 1967, riots broke out as a result of the heightened political climate and social tension, and was put down by the royal police force. Most pro-Communists organizations were outlawed by the government and marginalized by the public.

The 1967 Riot has been well-studied, but scholars’ analysis of the ramifications of the Cultural Revolution to the city usually ends here. However, the ripples of the Revolution can still feel as strong evidence of the failure and brutality of the CPC leadership. Locals weaponize the incident by making analogies between a certain aspect of the Culture Revolution and that of their opponents, so as to highlight and attack each other’s wrongdoings. This process of weaponization, in which an idea, concept, or object is translated into an effective propaganda message and used as a rhetorical assault, operates on several levels politically, socially and culturally. Weaponization can be used to legitimize one’s cause and attack the enemies, empowered by the virality of verbal and visual communication. It creates a battlefield where enemies competed for justification, favors, and influence. In this case, most Hong Kong people have believed that Mainlanders in the Cultural Revolution were uncivilized and irrational, in comparison to the self-perceived image of Hong Kongers that has been educated and sensible, which has been consolidated by the unpopularity of the 1967 riot. There have been copious attempts to draw similarities between the Cultural Revolution and political movement in Hong Kong in this decade, like the 2014 Umbrella Movement and the 2016 Mongkok Riot. This essay thus extends the academic conversation on the longlasting effect of the Cultural Revolution as a serious part of the local anti-Beijing and anti-China sentiments in nowadays.

III.

The term “Cultural Revolution” appearing in articles about the recent protests of both pro-democracy and pro-government camps. The term is unanimously perceived negatively, which is peculiar itself given the “multiplicity of standpoints on historical events.” While it may be understandable for the anti-Beijing camp to use the radical Revolution to embarrass the authority, the same action is surprising for the pro-government camp. The CPC has adopted a policy of evasion and treated it as a sensitive issue. The Hong Kong pro-government camp’s, as well as the pro-democracy camp’s, high-profile denunciation of the Revolution, may be explained by their effort in weaponizing the Cultural Revolution as a silver bullet.

The weaponization works on the foundation that most of the Hong Kong people know about the Cultural Revolution and have an aligned negative view on it. Articles of both camps refer to the situation roiled by the protests now in Hong Kong as “Hong-Kong style Cultural Revolution,” or “Cultural Revolution 2.0.” Titles that asserts the Cultural Revolution with “gory,” “wail” and “losing people’s heart” display explicit negative connotation. This negativity is well developed in the articles when writers parallel it with the damaging phenomena of the current protests.

The term “Cultural Revolution” is used more than as a buzzword in the titles but is employed to describe the destruction and violence occurred in the current movement by writers of both sides. The anti-protesters camp stresses the physical assaults made by young students during the strikes. For example, in his opinion piece that advocates the need to terminate
the youngsters’ violence, Yu Pinghai condemns the university students, just like the Red Guards in the Cultural Revolution, in destroying stores, beating up opponents, and throwing petrol bombs and claims such actions recreated the lawlessness society in the Cultural Revolution. On the other side of the coin, Luo Xiaoran denounces police sieges in universities and condemns the destruction of the grave of Principal Cai Yuanpei in Hong Kong. He labels the renowned Chinese educator-politician Cai as the leading figure in pursuing academic freedom in China, thus labels the destruction of the grave as an act of demolishing freedom. Luo compares this act to “destroy the Four Olds” during the Cultural Revolution in which historical monuments were eradicated. The Cultural Revolution becomes a symbol of political violence and the writer’s weapon depends on their denunciation of the Cultural Revolution — the more violent they can make the Cultural Revolution appear, the more uncivilized their current opponents are.

Aside from smashing properties, writers also apply the historical metaphor to the struggling campaigns now. “Struggling session” was a public collective plot in the Maoist era to attack the Party’s enemies with verbal humiliations and physical assaults. It created unbearable harm to the body and mentality of victims, who ranged from top party leaders to local landowners and teachers. In the current discourse, for instance, Fang in his article highlights the “wind of struggling.” He denounces radical protesters who struggled against everyone who had different political opinions with them, even when they were their closest teachers, colleagues, and parents. The struggles against the university principal and staff, as well as government officials, which include spreading hate speech and online vigilantism, also are the targets of Fang’s condemnation. “Struggle,” (批鬥 pidou) a term Fang uses repeatedly, is a specific vocabulary that is contextualized with socio-political movements in the early PRC era and popularized in the Cultural Revolution.

Meanwhile, the pro-democracy camp also alleges their opposing camp of performing “struggling.” Qu Weilin’s article, which brings the severity of the current government oppression of citizens to light, asserts Beijing’s “struggles against the rich people and property owners in Hong Kong.” She is mainly referring to the government and its official media’s accusation against the wealthiest merchant in Hong Kong, Lee Kashing. Her sentence ends with a prophecy of a soon occurrence of a “Cultural Revolution 2.0” in Hong Kong. Siding with Qu and the protests, Guan Jianwen scorns at Fang’s label of the Cultural Revolution on the protesters when he literally highlights in his blog post the mob attack in Yuen Long on 21 July against the supporters of the protests. Like many critics of the police force and the government, he identifies the mob as criminal gangs. He implies that the anti-protester crimes group’s struggle against ordinary citizens is the prelude to soon reappearance in Hong Kong of bloody struggle sessions in the Cultural Revolution.

The struggling campaigns mentioned by the writers shed light on their denunciation on extreme identity politics. In the Cultural Revolution, the PRC government used “labeling” to create two camps – the “Reds” and the “Blacks.” The “Blacks” were portrayed as villains from rich families who constantly plan to revolt against the regime. Similarly, “political labeling” was used in the police force in Hong Kong and political hatred was fostered against the “new black five categories” – students, layers, journalists, medical personnel and social workers. In the same vein, protestors point their swords to every policeman and pro-government citizens regardless of their actual behavior and speech. In these articles, the rhetoric of employing the term “struggle” to substitute every personal assault made by the opposing camp was not only to raise the level of harm created but accuse the opposing camp in their political immorality and incorrectness. The struggling campaigns not only polarize society, but also questioned the morals like respecting elders since many victims of the “struggling campaigns” in both eras have been close family members and teachers.

IV.

The weaponization of the Cultural Revolution is based on a consensus that the majority of Hong Kong people have similar knowledge of the Cultural Revolution. The quotation of slogans and borrowing of vocabulary in the Cultural Revo-
olution shows a higher level of learning of the revolution. This historical knowledge, and the unanimous negative resonance based on history, should not be taken for granted when the education of the sensitive political events in China, and allegedly starting in Hong Kong, had been tightly controlled, and they were not taught or euphuistically spoken of in the education of Chinese history.

On top of the education of the event, Hong Kong people’s perception of the Cultural Revolution is also based on personal or collective memory and ties. As Brickers and Yip acknowledge in the testimonies of the witnesses of the 1967 Riots in Hong Kong, first-person accounts “reminds us an important dimension of history: an awareness of the past that is personally felt.” Most of the refugees who escaped to Hong Kong, as victims of the Revolution, resented the Cultural Revolution. The sentiment was shared by most Hong Kong locals who were horrified to see dead bodies floating on the harbors from the Shenzhen River.

The Cultural Revolution leaves enduring legacy in Hong Kong based on collective knowledge and memory. It continues to polarize society by strengthening the arguments between pro-Communist camp and their opponents. Meanwhile, it also acts as a tool of “othering” between locals and Mainlanders. This process of othering, as proposed Elaine Chan, is no longer initiated by the government as she suggested, but became a bottom-up movement. The characteristics of Hong Kong mentioned in the articles, including the rule of law, the democratic system, and freedom of speech, which both camps accused the other of destroying, are indicators that Hong Kong is different from China and constitute the pride in Hong Kong identity. The collective memory of the Cultural Revolution has provided Hong Kong people a group identity through the construction of narrative, which was built on victimization. The Red Guards and generally Mainlanders in that era were portrayed as aggressors and killers. Hong Kong media still employs this generalization to distinguish the locals and their mainland counterparts. The weaponization of the Cultural Revolution thus displays long-lasting impact of this incident.

VI.

The current protests in Hong Kong constitute a defining moment in the city’s history. While Hong Kong’s future is unclear to us, the weaponization of the Cultural Revolution is the discourse surrounding the protests offered us some insights. The vocabulary of the Cultural Revolution is the media to channel denunciation, if not hatred, in multidimensions towards their opponents. Their opponents’ notorious behavior is advertised through the terms in the Cultural Revolution, thus making those acts even more sinister. This reveals that the ultimate goals of the effective weaponization are not only to attack the opposing camp, but also to mobilize or demobilize their readers. This is both the cause and the result of the polarization of Hong Kong society, which will possibly extend beyond protests. More than 40 years after the Revolution ended, it is still shaping the relations between the supporters and opponents of Beijing. Scholars should view the Cultural Revolution as still having an ongoing impact, while the Hong Kong locals should prevent the Cultural Revolution from truly reappearing.

WORKS CITED

Fung: Weaponization of the Cultural Revolution in the 2019 Hong Kong Protests


9. Luo Xiaoran, “Buzhi moshe fenmu, haiyou ziyou jingshen.” [Not only scouring the grave but also the spirit of freedom] Inmedia November 17, 2019. https://www.inmediahk.net/node/1068704


