



ASIAN CHRISTIANITY
IN THE DIASPORA

THEOLOGICAL
REFLECTIONS
ON THE
HONG KONG
UMBRELLA
MOVEMENT

EDITED BY JUSTIN K. H. TSE
AND JONATHAN Y. TAN



Asian Christianity in the Diaspora

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Theological Reflections on the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement

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FOREWORD

In the fall of 2014, hundreds of thousands of people in Hong Kong took to the streets to demand universal suffrage and authentic democracy. The mass protest captured global attention, with reports on prime time American television news, a cover story in *Time* and *The Economist*, and photos and headlines spread across the Internet and social media. While there had been frequent social protests in both Hong Kong and mainland China, this was the first time that civil disobedience was used at such a large scale to express the people's political will under Chinese Communist rule.

Events leading up to the protest began in 2013, when three pro-democracy leaders initiated a civil disobedience campaign and called it Occupy Central with Love and Peace. Although the leaders insisted that their use of "occupy" had more to do with Martin Luther King Jr. than Occupy Wall Street, this grassroots mobilization can still be seen in the larger context of the global Occupy Movement in 2011–2012 against corporate greed, economic inequity, and political disenfranchisement. The people in Hong Kong were no longer willing to be shut out of the process of nominating candidates for the election of the city's chief executive and to give up the power to a small circle that represents the interests of big businesses, often with ties to Beijing. Through songs, posters, rituals, artwork, symbols, slogans, lectures, and social media, the Umbrella Movement created a public political space and culture that was lively, fluid, and participatory. Both the assembly of bodies in public space and the political performance expressed and enacted the people's political aspirations and visions for a different political future. Student leaders boycotted

classes and took an active role as the movement developed. The demonstration became known as the Umbrella Movement, because protesters used umbrellas to defend themselves against tear gas used by the police.

As expected, the Umbrella Movement elicited different responses from the Hong Kong Christian community, since civil disobedience tested the limits of law and order. For some, the strategy of occupying streets for months was too extreme, but for others, the protest symbolized a Pentecostal experience and a foretaste of direct democracy. This book presents a comprehensive account of the background and development of the protest and analyses of Christian responses from Protestant and Catholic traditions. The authors are seasoned observers of Hong Kong politics, and several participated in the Umbrella Movement. Their biblical and theological reflections draw from liberation hermeneutics, political theology, Catholic social teaching, and feminist theology. They demonstrate that theology can no longer be done only for the church and academy, but must also enter the public square to become public theology.

These theological reflections are important not only for the people of Hong Kong, but also for others searching for political and religious visions to create another world in which people's voices and dignity are respected. Theology from the Umbrella Movement both advances and critiques political theology in Asia, such as Minjung theology in Korea, theology of struggle in the Philippines, Homeland theology in Taiwan, Dalit theology in India, and theologies from indigenous and tribal communities and ethnic minorities in different countries. I hope this book will inspire and provoke discussion on faith and politics at a time when Asia has become a key geopolitical area in shaping the economic and political destiny of the world and the future of the planet.

Kwok Pui-lan

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The making of a volume like this creates in our hearts much room for gratitude. The essays from Lap Yan Kung and Rose Wu originated as pieces published at *Syndicate: A New Forum for Theology* in a panel that Justin K.H. Tse originally edited, entitled ‘The Umbrella Movement and Theology.’ We are grateful to them for expanding their thoughts on the protests and to Sam Tsang—also a contributor to that forum—for crafting a completely new essay from his original piece there, which focused on the popular usage of scripture in the protests. Tsang’s new piece now takes on the complex exegetical problems at an academic level. The two versions of all three essays can be read as complementary pieces that comprehensively survey the use of liberation hermeneutics, biblical exegesis, and feminist theology during the Umbrella Movement. We are extremely thankful that *Syndicate’s* managing editor, Christian Amondson, gave the go-ahead for these essays’ expansion and publication here. We are also thankful to Mary Yuen for augmenting her piece, originally published on AsiaNews.it, with a fuller academic treatment of Catholic social teaching. We have also been incredibly fortunate to have Kwok Pui-lan write a foreword that reminded us to situate Hong Kong in the larger frame of theologies of liberation; we have also benefited from having Kwok as an advisor on the manuscript in its various stages. Our hearts are full, and we are very thankful.

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thanks are due to Sam Rocha, who encouraged us to write this book as a pedagogical exercise.

Finally, this book would not have been possible without the courage and brilliance of the Umbrella Movement protesters themselves. Without their action, there would have been nothing on which to reflect. We hope that this book contributes in some small way to the fostering of ever-more creative forms of action in Hong Kong, a city that we all love and a place that deserves our careful examination, not least because transformative protest there has the potential to inform social and political action throughout the world.

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Introduction: The Umbrella Movement and Liberation Theology

Justin K.H. Tse

September 28, 2014, is usually considered the day that the theological landscape in Hong Kong changed. For 79 days, hundreds of thousands of Hong Kong citizens occupied key political and economic sites in the Hong Kong districts of Admiralty, Causeway Bay, and Mong Kok, resisting the government's attempts to clear them out until court injunctions were handed down in early December.¹ Captured on social media and live television, the images of police in Hong Kong throwing 87 volleys of tear gas and pepper-spraying students writhing in agony have been imprinted onto the popular imagination around the world. Using the image of a student standing up all wrapped up in plastic wrap to protect against police brutality, the cover story of *The Economist* on October 4, 2014, was titled "The Party v. the People," attempting to analyze the Hong Kong protests' impact on relations with Beijing. Not to be outdone, the *Time* magazine cover dated October 13, 2014, featured the image of a goggled young man with a face mask triumphantly holding up two umbrellas surrounded almost like incense with the smoke of the tear gas. On the front of the magazine is plastered three words, "The Umbrella Revolution," declaring that Hong Kong's youth were fed up with the lack of democracy in this

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Special Administrative Region (SAR) of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Gathering shortly thereafter in their newly formed Umbrella Square, the Hong Kong Federation of Students and Scholarism (a secondary school student movement led by the charismatic Joshua Wong Chi-fung, himself gracing the cover of *Time* the very next week on October 20) declared that this was not a revolution because they were not overthrowing the government.² They asserted that the occupations were a *movement*—the Umbrella Movement—to demand that the government institute “genuine universal suffrage,” the right of citizens in Hong Kong to vote for candidates that they could directly nominate and who would not have to be vetted by the central government in Beijing. A series of debates circulated in the Umbrella Movement's wake, wondering whether the protests constituted Hong Kong's Tiananmen moment, hearkening back to the student democracy movement that had resulted in close to one million people occupying Beijing's central public square in 1989, only to be violently suppressed with tanks, bayonets, and live bullets throughout the streets of the PRC's capital on June 4.³

Democracy, protest, solidarity, youth At face value, one might suppose that the Umbrella Movement is the birth of a kind of liberation theology in Hong Kong; certainly, that you are reading a volume attempting a theological reflection on the protests might evoke a sentiment of this sort. Indeed, one fascinating focal point of the constant media coverage of the Umbrella Movement was that Christians were not only involved, but heavily engaged in leading the spectrum of groups that composed the democracy movement.⁴ The official estimates of the actual number of Christians in Hong Kong, both Catholic and Protestant, has been at around a consistent 10 % of its population of seven million since the 1980s, suggesting that the significant influence of Christians on the Umbrella Movement—indeed, in a historical sense, on Hong Kong society—is not captured by sheer statistics.⁵ For example, Joshua Wong is an evangelical whose family has roots in the charismatic renewal movement. The leaders of the group that arguably brought about the civic awareness that catalyzed the movement in 2013, Occupy Central with Love and Peace (OCLP), boast a law professor of evangelical persuasion, Benny Tai Yiu-ting, and a Baptist minister, the Rev. Chu Yiuming. While the current cardinal-bishop of Hong Kong, John Cardinal Tong Hon, has been less than enthusiastic about the protests, his predecessor, Joseph Cardinal Zen Ze-ken actively led the students out to the protest

that resulted in the occupations. In the Mong Kok occupation, an ecumenical band of Christians—Roman Catholics, Anglicans, non-denominational evangelicals—built a makeshift sanctuary called St. Francis’ Chapel on the Street. Even those who criticize these leaders as overly bourgeois count among their number those who identify as Christian. The core of radical democratic political party People Power is a group known as Narrow Church, which is led by seminary students from Chung Chi Divinity School of the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK). As a mentor to the radical democracy group Civic Passion, politician Raymond Wong Yuk-man is a baptized Christian who attends a socially engaged, liturgically innovative, non-denominational church in the working-class Shauekiwan district. Certainly, there is something to be said here about how the arc of theology bends toward justice and liberation, engaged in solidarity with the demands of democracy as a way of solving social ills and political corruption.

That the call for grassroots political agency has been key to many articulations of theologies of liberation in both Latin America and in Asia prompts the question of whether the Umbrella Movement can be considered a moment of liberation theology in Hong Kong. Certainly, there are resonances with what theologians Joerg Rieger and Kwok Puilan call the “theology of the multitude,” the “rising up” of the *ochlos* (“a crowd or mass of people”) and the *laos* (“the common people”) against their rulers by invoking the in-breaking of the kingdom of God.⁶ Typical of academic theological reflection, though, the essays that have been included in this collection do not tell a simple story that is easily continuous with such theological trends, even though one of our authors, Lap Yan Kung, has certainly drawn inspiration in his work from the Peruvian theologian known as the founder of liberation theology, Gustavo Gutiérrez.⁷ Indeed, the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council and the meeting of the Latin American bishops at Medellín, Colombia, in 1968 produced what we have come to call liberation theology and brought about the adoption of concepts such as “basic ecclesial communities,” the Second Vatican Council’s moniker of “the people of God,” the “see-judge-act” method, and the critique of unjust structures of domination through groups such as the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC), *minjung* (“of the people”) theologians during the Park Chung Hee dictatorship of Korea in the 1970s, Dalit (“untouchable caste”) theology in the Church of North India in the 1980s, the People Power Movement in

the Philippines, and the emergence of theologies from migrants and indigenous peoples within Asia.⁸ Yet the simple fact that there is a tradition of Asian liberation theology should not obscure the fact that the Umbrella Movement has its own theological genealogy, one that is not generically “Asian” or beholden to “theologies of liberation,” but that is rooted in the odd history of Hong Kong’s pre-1997 colonial relationship with the United Kingdom and its post-1997 arrangement with the PRC, in which it enjoys both legal autonomy and suffers a national identity crisis through the principle of “one country, two systems.”

Indeed, the Chinese case is what makes the Umbrella Movement difficult to neatly conceptualize within the otherwise straightforward rubrics of liberation theology. After all, liberation theology has its origins in the critique of capitalist dictatorships that had allied themselves during the Cold War with the so-called “free world” of North American Treaty Organization (NATO) countries. This is not to say that liberation theology, contrary to popular opinion (as well as that of Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger’s Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith from the 1980s to the 2000s), is necessarily beholden to Marxist ideologies of class struggle and the agency of capital processes. Indeed, Paulo Freire’s influence on the “conscientization” of Latin American liberation theology is—as philosopher of education Sam Rocha and his students argue⁹—perhaps better seen as a proto-evangelium for Medellín’s call for “conscientización” ordered to changing the structures and observance of justice.¹⁰ So too, theologies of solidarity with the *minjung* in Korea, the *dalit* in India, the people in the Philippines, and the migrant workers and indigenous peoples of Asia usually have more to do with the inculturation of Christian concepts than the ideological indoctrination of secular materialism.¹¹ However, the objection still stands: Most of these cases have to do with “liberation” from the un-free conditions of the free world. With the emergence of Chinese democracy movements such as the one in Tiananmen Square in 1989 and the various protests that have riddled the Republic of China in Taiwan and Hong Kong SAR when a closer relationship with the PRC central government has been suggested, this is—strangely enough—liberation theology done in relation to a nation-state that for all intents and purposes still identifies with the now-defunct Soviet bloc of yesteryear.¹²

The question of whether such geopolitical conditions qualify the protest movements as “liberation theology” is thus complex. Add to the mess the complexity following the Open Door Policy reforms of 1978 that

opened the PRC to a platform of “market socialism,”¹³ and one hears political psychoanalyst Slavoj Žižek joking that the PRC is really “totalitarian capitalism” more similar to the style of Lee Kwan Yew in Singapore than Mao Zedong in revolutionary China,¹⁴ what Marxist geographer David Harvey calls “neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics” in a deliberate jab at then-paramount leader Deng Xiaoping’s description of the post-reform era as a time of “socialism with Chinese characteristics.”¹⁵ On the one hand, the conditions of market reform do place the Chinese case, complete with its pretensions to “market socialism,” in square continuity with the Latin American and Asian cases. However, an intact communist government will still have the ideology that the expansion of its central government’s powers is a mode of liberation itself. In a stunning analysis by geographer Kean Fan Lim, “market socialism” may be nothing more than the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) slowing down its strategy to initiate the class struggle to bring in a communist utopia.¹⁶ Asserting sovereignty claims in Tibet, Xinjiang, Hong Kong SAR, and Taiwan can thus be understood from the CCP’s perspective as liberating these territories from the ideological work of capitalism, placing a damper on the glib usage of “liberation” to describe theologies that might be emerging from the participation of Christians in the Umbrella Movement.

A better approach—one that we take in this book—is to perform thick descriptions of the concrete situation in Hong Kong as a distinct approach of doing theology, rooting our discussion not in the generic language of “Asian” liberation theology or evangelistic inculturation, but in the history, politics, and public spheres of Hong Kong itself.¹⁷ To be sure, such an approach is a direct application of Joseph Cardinal Cardijn’s see-judge-act method from the early twentieth-century Young Christian Workers movement in Belgium: one sees a sociological situation of injustice, judges it theologically, and takes action. Enshrined as the ecclesially sanctioned approach to social justice in Pope John XXIII’s 1961 encyclical *Mater et Magistra*, see-judge-act has become a staple of theologies of liberation that have both been central to the implementation of Catholic social teaching and transcended their Roman origins.¹⁸ Yet keeping in mind the caveats for calling protest theologies “theologies of liberation” in Hong Kong, we ask for patience and understanding from our readers as we nuance the continuities and discontinuities of the Umbrella Movement from other movements that have gone before it. While a Hong Kong-specific “liberation” is certainly a theme that emerges from the essays, a more accurate description of the task we have set for ourselves is that we are trying to tell

the story of Hong Kong through the Umbrella Movement from several different theological perspectives—Catholic solidarity, feminist theology, the theology of *kairos*, and biblical exegesis.¹⁹

In terms of the steps of see-judge-act, we are reflecting retrospectively on an action that has already been taken, which means we are seeing and judging again afresh. We contend that this mode of place-specific theologizing is valuable even for readers without a dedicated interest in Hong Kong, because our thick description advances an approach to theology that is emerging directly out of the Umbrella Movement. In this new method, the thick details of the political apparatus, the economic system, the sociological conditions, and the local culture matter a great deal for the task of doing theology in any place. To put it another way, we are mapping the “grounded theologies”—the “performative practices of placemaking informed by understandings of the transcendent”—emerging out of Hong Kong, describing the geographies of the Umbrella Movement through a variety of theological registers.²⁰ One could advance our approach in other new protest cultures in the world, be it the global Occupy Movement, the Arab Spring with its unintentional geopolitical production of the Islamic State and the tragic refugee crisis in Syria and Iraq, the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement against Israeli occupations of Palestinian territory, the Euromaidan protests in Ukraine and the subsequent tensions on the Russia-Ukraine border, the African American #BlackLivesMatter movement in the USA, the Idle No More indigenous protests against settler colonialism in Canada, the Taiwanese Sunflower Movement against regional integration with the PRC, the Bersih movement in Malaysia calling for clean government, the protests in Caracas against Venezuelan economic policies and state-sponsored gendered violence, and the Mexican protest against state collusion with narcotics gangs recently given a new symbolic register by the brutal events in Ayotzinapa.²¹ The task of the theologian is thus to *describe* instead of prescribe, or, to put it in a less binary way, to let the thick description drive the suggestive prescriptions from the ground up. Who are the specific theological actors in each of these cases? In what geographical conditions are they operating? How do the lenses of different theologies shift the thick description of the same place, the same protest, the same political apparatus? How can these differing theological actors work together, what are they working toward in their own terms, and how are their objectives theological?

In other words, we are using the Hong Kong case to highlight the specific theologies that the Umbrella Movement has engendered in the hope

of spurring comparative scholarship to take on the thick description of protest, politics, and places as a mode of theological analysis. At this point, we need to be clear about our politics. We reject the idea that we should be neutral observers seeking a liberal overlapping consensus of every theological position on the Hong Kong protests. Indeed, critical scholars of secularization have repeatedly reminded us that the quest for political neutrality, especially in matters of faith is often its own position—and one usually allied with the modern state establishment’s political agenda to subjectify its citizens!²² During the Umbrella Movement, residents of Hong Kong wore three ribbon colors to distinguish their positions on the 2014 events: a yellow ribbon denoted support for the student strikes that eventually led to the occupations, a blue ribbon symbolized opposition, and a green ribbon signaled an attempt at neutrality. In this schematic, all of our contributors would be classified as yellow-ribboners.

We are quite untroubled and unapologetic about our politics for three key reasons. First, while we understand that theological actors in Hong Kong were rather divided on the Umbrella Movement, we also observe that the arguments against the occupations mostly rested on the need for the church to maintain the political and economic stability of Hong Kong as a global city. As several of our contributors suggest, this is not only a secular contention, but it fails the litmus test of commitment to the virtues of peace with justice and charity that are much more strongly identified with the protesters than with a government whose interests are tied to the private whims of property tycoons, PRC officials, and even the criminal underworld. Moreover, to speak in the key of liberation theology, we show that the skewed economic system in Hong Kong that funnels much of the capital and political agency to a colonizing ruling class necessitates what theologians of liberation have called a “preferential option for the poor,” a commitment to do theology from the perspective of those who have not as opposed to those who have.

Second, we note that the hard-and-fast definitions of yellow versus blue versus green ribbons describe an ideological form that did not translate neatly onto the ground during the Umbrella Movement. It is true, on the one hand, that blue-ribboners led by figures such as Leticia Lee and Robert Chow often violently attacked the yellow-ribbon protesters; what is more, some of these attackers were discovered later to have been paid agitators. However, even those who wore blue and green were forced to participate in the movement because the protests consumed the city in an all-encompassing discussion about Hong Kong’s political