The Unprepared Leftists in Hong Kong: the case of Left 21

Choi Mei Kei

Abstract

This project aims to fill out the historical gap of the left-wing history[1] in Hong Kong. Locating leftists in the social movement organization Left 21, which was active between 2010-2013, I will discuss what left-wing politics meant in Hong Kong, and how it interacted with local issues. Within the micro level, activists' life trajectories and experiences will be presented to show personal intersection with social movement history. From their observation of Left 21, its ideology, position, and influence on civil society will also be discussed.

The major method used in the project is interviewing core members. There is no field site as the group has already stopped operating. A few marginalized and non-members were also interviewed, to give the perspective of an outsider. 12 people in total were interviewed. Another method used is content analysis. The articles published by Left 21 will also be analyzed to see their stance and promotion strategy. However, Left 21's official website has already expired and become inaccessible. Some articles mentioned by informants were missing. Some internal documents were kindly provided by informants for my reference.

[1] Editor's note: Leftwing politics in Hong Kong has an interesting position. The ruling authority, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), is theoretically left but they have also been challenged whether they have maintained the left-wing ideology after the market reform in 1978 (區龍宇, 2017). How did leftwing activists who had different relationships with the official ideology negotiate their own political beliefs? CHOI's thesis explores this complicated process with the stories of her informants. One thing to bear in mind, however, is that being "left" in Hong Kong does not always equal to supporting the CCP.

1. Introduction

When I was 14, on the night when tear gas was fired in Admiralty and the 2014 Umbrella Movement sparked, I was watching its TV livestream with my family. On one of the busiest roads in Hong Kong, people were screaming and running in smoke. Later that day, the road was occupied by tents and banners with slogans of "I want genuine universal suffrage". The scene was something I had never imagined. At that time, I delved into the social debates and aspired to be a journalist who "scrutinizes the government and speaks for the weak". I chose journalism and communication when I entered CUHK.

My first-year study was disappointing: classmates lacked social concern and only entered the university for a graduation certificate; teachers talked about "editors' autonomy" despite the fact that interviewees were extremely worried about the potential aftermath of the publication of their pieces; my ideas for newswriting was brutally rejected by the teachers without thorough discussion.

I wasn't satisfied being in class.

Thus, I spent most of my university time in a student organization advocating for grassroots' rights. From endless discussions and readings, I found out my original understanding of Hong Kong society was deficient. Believing in the Lion Rock Spirit, I have been following academic competition in order to climb the social ladder, and attributed failure and inequality to personal inability and laziness. Although the democratic movement was tempting to me, I never imagined

how universal suffrage could solve all the social problems of Hong Kong. Then I learned about capitalism, a totalizing system that is ruling our social relations, social organizations, and culture.

I then asked, why didn't I come across left-wing ideologies until university, even though Hong Kong is an extremely unequal society? What does being "left-wing" mean in Hong Kong? How did they come about in history?

Research Background

Studies regarding the Hong Kong Left mostly revolve around the post-war state-mobilized leftist systems or youth movements in the 1970s, but have rarely focused on its historical changes since then, and how current political power is related to the Radical Left movements. My research about Left 21 tries to fill the historical gap to illustrate the power and organization of leftists since the handover, and their effect on the political agenda of Hong Kong society, as well as the culture of the organization and its activists.

Located between the British and Chinese empires, colonial Hong Kong has long been a politically important arena for left and right struggles. The establishment of the People's Republic of China and the Cold War split the city into either an anti-colonial or anti-communist camp whenever social issues were discussed. The leftists before the 1967 Riot were mostly mobilized by the PRC state, promoting patriotic spirit and national pride. The post-war "leftist system" (左派系統) in Hong Kong was a system of PRC-mobilized institutions, which included schools, enterprises, media, unions, communities, creating an alternative social system other than

that of the British Hong Kong government, to ensure the PRC's interest in Hong Kong (趙永佳與呂大樂，2014). Social benefits and union strikes were organized through that system.

Mobilized by the PRC state, the leftists were militant and strictly obeyed the rule of the Chinese Communist Party, but it also meant that they had limited autonomy. With the PRC's strategic plan to maintain Hong Kong as a capitalistic colonial city with a free market to retain the economic interests of mainland China, the leftists as a result placed nationalism prior to anti-colonialism and anti-capitalism, as a "true" revolution in Hong Kong would shatter its stability. However, after the 1967 Riot, society was shaken by a new wave of youth radicalism as the protest revealed the dark side of colonial rule. The local "New Left" groups in Hong Kong, influenced by the global counterculture trend, called for greater concern over inequality and injustice locally, nation-wide, and internationally, shifting from state nationalism to more bottom-up socialism and anarchistic ideals (Pan, 2022). The Chinese as an Official Language Movement and the Defend Diaoyutai Movement in the early 1970s opened the following social movement period.

In the early 1980s, as a result of the continuation of the previous New Left Radicalism, the "social movement industry" was born. It was composed of various professionalized pressure groups made up of social workers and university students, which initiated different types of collective action. (Lui and Chiu, 1997). The nominating system in councils and the lack of elections, which restricted the opportunity structure for activists from closed formal political channels, encouraged alliances and collaboration in direct actions among different groups.

However, the bottom-up left-wing social movement was later largely undermined by the hegemony of the capitalistic colonial authority. The modernized and rationalized colonial government was reformed to be more efficient and upheld liberal discourse about "upholding law and order and fulfilling the basic needs of people with reforming welfare policies under economic development". It dismissed and depoliticized contentious political issues into mere administrative and bureaucratic matters (Lui and Chiu, 1997). “How the policy should be imposed” became more important than “Why it should be imposed”. Hence, the motivation and organizing power of social movements was not as strong as in the past. The opening of electoral politics in the mid-1980s attracted grassroots organizations to join the parliamentary movement, inevitably leading to the loss of attention and resources in more mundane organization and direct mobilization. The agenda of the social movement shifted to formal political participation and hence democratization, as a result of the handover bringing foreseeable change in political structure. In other words, the activists’ strategy for social change was to share political power with the Chinese government. The power of progressive politics was absorbed into the administrative apparatus, consequently marginalizing the momentum of grassroots and community groups once captured by the New Left.

Aside from the dominance of democratization and parliamentary politics, various movements of local character took place after the handover. These movements mostly revolved around the conservation of cultural heritage and old neighborhoods, with famous examples including preserving Lee Tung Street, Star Ferry Pier, and Choi Yuen Village. Activists tried to frame issues such as privatization and neoliberal governmental policies as issues of cultural identity (Chen and Szeto, 2015), thereby taking a left-leaning culturalist position. Unfortunately, the structural critique of neoliberalism was not well-received by the public and media, leaving

attention on sheer cultural identity and local character. Some scholars even described these activists as “post-1980s generation” and “post-materialism”, who urged self-expressive values and avoided materialist concern (Lee, 2016).

For the general public, left-wing politics was neither familiar nor appealing. The right-wing media and government strategically depicted the 1967 Riot as violent, idolizing PRC leaders, and most importantly, “damaging the prosperity and stability of Hong Kong” (劉璧嘉, 2021), a discourse that resurfaces even today whenever there is a radical anti-government demonstration. Although the majority of citizens could hardly enjoy “prosperity and stability” given the poor living conditions, the threat of improvised explosive devices remained the most vivid memory regarding the 1967 Riot. Leftists were therefore associated with violence and nationalism.

As the radical left in the later 1970s failed to dominate the mainstream political agenda with the opening election and handover, left-wing politics was further marginalized in public discourse. In the 1980s, anti-Communist China sentiment started spreading, as the future of Hong Kong was not guaranteed stability under the background of the drafting of the Basic Law, the debate on political reform, and then the June 4th Incident of 1989. In the 1991 Legislative Council Election, candidates with closer ties or more tolerance for the Beijing government failed to gain the trust of voters, who feared that future political figures would be “patriots and committed to socialism”, although what socialism meant was never clarified (Leung, 1993). The fear of mainland China can be also reflected in the sense of identity. Although people recognized that Hong Kong and China shared common historical traits and cultural customs, they tended to

distance themselves from Chinese identity by depicting China as a poor and underdeveloped "socialist" country (Mathews 2001).

With the marginalized and weakened position of the radical Left and the anti-China sentiment from the public, the establishment of Left 21 in 2010 was remarkable, given their clear-cut stance to claim themselves as leftists. The group was a social movement organization calling for political-economic equality and the abolition of private property. By engaging in social debates about current issues, ranging from Hong Kong-China relations to imperialism internationally, Left 21 acted by publishing, protesting, and holding seminars. But in 2019, the group ceased to operate without a formal disbanding process.

Research Questions

What does left-wing politics mean, and what does it look like in Hong Kong? How have the ideology, activists, and movements changed over time? How is it been affected by the political-economic situation, and yet still developing its own characteristics and subjectivity?

Methodology

The major method used in the project is interviewing core members. There is no field site as the group has already stopped operating. By interviewing the core members of Left 21, my project studies their stance, biographical experience, and attitude toward left-wing politics. Through their experience, I will reconstruct the history and actions of Left 21, and how it interacted with civil society. A few marginalized and non-members were also interviewed, to give the perspective of an outsider. A total of 12 people were interviewed. As I had already known some of the informants

due to social movement networks, rapport could be quickly built. With this trust, they felt more comfortable discussing uneasy experiences and referencing certain common memories. Although most of the informants said that it was unnecessary to use a pseudonym due to their already high exposure in past actions, I still use pseudonyms in the current uncertain political environment to avoid any traceable records. Apart from interviews, another method used is content analysis. The articles published by Left 21 will also be analyzed to see their stance and promotion strategy. However, Left 21's official website has already expired and become inaccessible. Some articles mentioned by informants are missing. Some internal documents were kindly provided by informants for my reference.

2. Becoming Political Actors: Three generations of leftists

Participating in social movements is never a natural instinct or autonomous decision, but a process interacting with historical context, social relations, and personal emotions.

In past research on social movements, the approach of presenting the social context of activists is important for us to understand how individuals' decisions are situated in a particular society. McAdam (1988) described the process of joining low and high-risk social movements. With socialization, individuals obtain certain political attitudes. After contacting activists, they try out low-risk activism. With biographical availability like the free time of students before employment, they devote themselves to more radical actions and construct activist networks, ideologies, and identities. Because the process might vary according to context, McAdam brought the vision of life trajectories of political actors, and how it would continue influencing the person's decision

politically. Showing life trajectories, Whittier (1995) also presented how different political socialization, stakes, and experiences affected activists' private and political choices.

On a more micro level, individuals aren't passively receiving outside information or making decisions only along the social tide, but having their own judgment, passion, and principles. So understanding their feelings and emotions also clarifies the dynamics between individuals and structures. Passerini (1996) paid attention to the role of emotions, affects, and beliefs. Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta (2013) discussed the role of emotion in social movement, to challenge an assumption among social scientists that all human actions are rational and consistent. In contrast, emotion might be a catalyst in the recruitment process of activists through social networks and affective bonds. The sense of solidarity and construction of identity among members of a social movement could be powerful to maintain cohesion.

In this section, adopting the approach by Fillieule and Neveu (2019), I will present political actors' socialization process and sociobiographical trajectories of activism. The background and life story of members of Left 21 can also illustrate the political agenda and atmosphere, and method of organization carried out by other social movement organizations. By dividing members into different generations, I discovered patterns of political activism at different times, in terms of the level of organization and individuals' mentality toward political issues. I will show how these changing historical contexts interact with and shape the becoming of different generations.

The 1st Generation: Ideological Struggles in the Cold War

Andy and John are members growing up in the 1960s, a generation when Cold War geopolitical struggles were salient to all kinds of political actions. Their experience showed the ideological opposition between different powers, but didn't mean that individuals' thoughts were static or fully aligned with the authority. Local social movements corresponding to Hong Kong's issues were still bred within the worldwide radical movement trend.

In post-war Hong Kong, after the Chinese Communist Party seized power in mainland China, it adopted a "long-term planning and utilizing" (長期打算，充分利用) strategy to acquiesce the British Colonial government continuing ruling Hong Kong. As the British also wished to maintain Hong Kong's status as a free trade port, they didn't intervene in the struggles between the Chinese Communist Party and the Kuomingtang, under the premise of maintaining the prosperity and stability of Hong Kong. The city hence was placed between powers and struggles in the Cold War. The two systems competed with each other by developing organizations and media propaganda in the city (羅永生，2017).

It was also a time when local social movements were cultivated. As more locally-born young people had their lives rooted in Hong Kong compared to the previous diasporic generations, and with the radical new left ideology sweeping the globe, the 1970s opened up the first generation of the local power of social movement independent from state power. The Chinese as an Official Language Movement and the Defend Diaoyutai Movement in the early 1970s marked the beginning of the student activism period.

The CCP-mobilized Leftist System

I had met Andy several times before in meetings of other NGOs. He is an experienced activist participating in community and labor organizations.

"I'd claim myself a leftist. I've learned about left-wing ideology since I was young." Andy's grandma was a member of the Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions, a CCP-mobilized organization to develop pro-CCP power in Hong Kong. When he was small, his grandma brought him to pro-leftist cinema and watched films like "Red Detachment of Women" (紅色娘子軍) and "Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy" (智取威虎山). These were popular stories about the revolutionary history of the Communist Party during the Cultural Revolution in mainland China. His family also joined the ceremony held by the Scientia Secondary School, a CCP-organized school, to celebrate the establishment of China's Republic of China on October 1st, at the time when National Day referred to the birthday of the Queen for British Hong Kong. "At my grandma's home, there's a red cloth with Mao Zedong badges that were put into the word 'loyalty' (忠). My interpretation of left during primary school was very simple: follow the great leader Mao Zedong."

Andy's experience is absurd and unimaginable for most youngsters nowadays, where the Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions is mocked for betraying workers' interests, and rarely do people adopt mainland propaganda in daily experience. But in the 1960s, the Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions was the crucial organization to develop pro-CCP power and to promote patriotic spirit and national pride (梁寶霖，梁寶龍，2014). The cinema and school mentioned were funded and organized by the federation, forming the "leftist system" (左派系統). It was almost like a self-sufficient society, which included schools, enterprises, media,

unions, and communities, creating an alternative social system to that of the British Hong Kong government (趙永佳，呂大樂，2014). Andy's family was mobilized to support the CCP under this leftist system.

But Andy's idea of the left was not limited to idolizing political leaders. He also absorbed the criticism of capitalism and colonialism. Andy remembered reading comics about child labor in 1970s Hong Kong, which was an easy medium to expose the exploitation of factories and the British colonial government. "The criticism of exploitation wasn't wrong. There was indeed an unfair situation during colonial times. All this information and experience indeed drove my interest to left-wing ideology, or to see things from a left-wing perspective." Socialism and communism were tempting to Andy.

Andy consumed the official discourse of the Chinese Communist Party at the beginning, but with the changing political environment, his previous ideas were challenged. Witnessing the 1976 Tiananmen incident, when citizens voiced their anger towards the Cultural Revolution at the funeral of respected leader Zhou Enlai. Andy started reading political magazines like Chengming (爭鳴) that introduced criticism of Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communist Party. He later also read magazines published by the Revolutionary Marxist League (革馬盟) and Pioneer (先驅社), the Trotskyist organizations in Hong Kong. "I was shocked. I realized that the Chinese Communist Party wasn't the only left-wing group, nor was it necessarily correct."

"The Old Leftist"

At the time, the leftists were mostly known as those well-organized by mainland China, but local radical students also gradually formed an independent left-wing power. The 1966 Star Ferry Riot and 1967 Riot shattered the authority of the colonial government, which motivated young people to rethink and evaluate the city that they were living in (香港專上學生聯會，1983). The local "New Left" groups influenced by the global counterculture trend called for concern on inequality and injustice locally, nation-wide and internationally, shifting from state nationalism to more bottom-up socialism and anarchism ideals.

John is a famous activist who has been joining social movements since a very young age. He participated in the Defend Diaoyutai Movement, which stood against Japan for claiming the sovereignty of Diaoyutai from China, when John was only 14. He got in contact with the secondary school section of the Hong Kong Federation of Students, a joint-university organization of student unions. "We saw that the colonial government was beating up lots of protesters, mostly youngsters. I joined the protest out of a sense of justice. And we were influenced more or less by nationalism." In the 1970s, political activities were extremely dangerous to the extent that people could be arrested simply by distributing flyers. "I started thinking about these political issues. It's hard not to attribute the problem to the whole colonial system." Other than the Diaoyutai movement, John was following other members of the secondary school group to visit the poor. "We were not rich at the time. But when I saw the living conditions in the public housing estate, where it's too hot to close the door, and without a private toilet, it was shocking for me to know there were people much poorer than me. Poverty could really seize a person's dignity. It forced me to seek an answer."

Magazines were the major way for youngsters to absorb new information. John subscribed to the Chinese Student Weekly (中國學生周報) and the 70's Biweekly (70 年代雙週刊), later the New Wave (新思潮), published by some young Trotskyists. John joined the editorial team of the New Wave and became a member of the Revolutionary Marxist League (革馬盟). He then established Pioneer (先驅社) and maintained a Trotskyist/revolutionary Marxist stance. He is active in the public sphere and in discussion up until today.

Pathway to Activism

John's story of becoming an activist might seem straightforward, but it was in fact never conventional in the 1970s, when politics was still a distant idea to most people. Protest and direct actions were strictly prohibited by British Hong Kong to prevent unrest after the 1967 Riot. Tolerance towards demonstrations by the public was also very low and they were deemed to be breaking social order. Political discussion requires a high educational level to partake since administrative policies were complicated and translated information was limited. There was no sense of a public sphere given the lack of elections and political groups. Thus, activism was inevitably a niche and non-mainstream way of life at the time.

Even for Andy, who subscribed to a particular political ideology, he didn't become a full-time activist until an arbitrary encounter. He originally worked in a social welfare institution that was apolitical. One of his colleagues was a member of *Pioneer*, the magazine Andy had been reading for years. Andy described how the 1989 Movement facilitated the political atmosphere of the whole society when people started having political discussions and education. Andy also tried holding a discussion section in his workplace and used articles from *Pioneer* for materials. It

encouraged him to get more in touch with *Pioneer* members. Ying's left-wing actions started at that time and he became a full-time activist in a labor organization.

The Cold War influence in the 1960s cultivated the salient ideological struggles, both among state-mobilized groups and international leftists. For politicized people, it was easy to learn about issues in colonial Hong Kong, China, and the West. The rising global status of China and the future of Hong Kong were crucial debates concerning changing international power dynamics, and the restructuring of capital and modes of production. Marxism and socialism were trendy and inevitably talked about.

However, compared to the vigorous political atmosphere in the 2010s where protests were popular in the news, for the general public in the 1960s, politics, ideology, and philosophy were still extremely uncommon. Activists only joined them through close interpersonal circles and affiliations. The social movement sphere remained an exceptionally small and closed circle. From Andy and John's experience, their pathway to activism highlighted certain characteristics: connection to an institutionalized mobilization system or existing social movement organizations, a high educational level, and a strong sense of justice.

However, entering the 1980s, with a more stable and developing political-economic environment, the pattern of social movement changed drastically.

The 2nd Generation: Professionalized Social Movement Organizations

For informants born in the 1970s-80s, the process of being politicized was closely linked to their experience in university, and engaging in student organizations. It brought them the opportunity to interact with professionalized social movement organizations.

The socio-political environment of Hong Kong changed in the 1980s. When the Sino-British Joint Declaration was signed and the future of Hong Kong was confirmed to be returning to China, the ideological opposition between the China and British government was settled. Most of the political discussions revolved around preparing for the handover and collaborating with the new political power: the Chinese government. So, Andy's experience under the leftist system was no longer applicable to most people born in the 1970-80s. With the ruling power of the Chinese government guaranteed, CCP-mobilized organizations like the Federation of Trade Unions turned from developing anti-colonial power to supporting the handover (梁寶霖&梁寶龍，2014). On the social movement side, as a result of the continuation of the previous New Left Radicalism, the "social movement industry" composed of various professionalized pressure groups was born, as the proliferation of different types of collective action had broadened the scope of politics (Lui and Chiu, 1997).

The June 4th incident, when Chinese citizens protested in Tiananmen Square demanding democratization and fairer economic reform in response to the opening up market policy since 1978 and its subsequent violent suppression was an important background for this generation. Hong Kong media and political parties were covering the incidents, and protests in Hong Kong mobilized more than 1 million citizens even under typhoon signal no.8. My informants in this generation commented how supporting democracy and freedom while being skeptical of the

Chinese government was almost like common sense, when the majority of people in Hong Kong were uncertain about the handover. But overall speaking, they still thought the social atmosphere was lukewarm to social actions. Politics was never a popular topic in daily life.

My three informants, Terry, Cole, and Ally were all admitted to the Chinese University of Hong Kong in the late 1990s.

From Nationalism to Socialism

When I conducted the interview with Terry, he was wearing a sporty T-shirt with the line "socialism over-worker" (社會主義加班人), with his Celtic Football Club jacket, a club known for its anti-imperialism characteristics. Terry is a football lover, and also currently a college lecturer. Under the social atmosphere of distrust for the Chinese government, Terry's interest in socialism originated in reading, when he read a book by Sun Yat-sun that claimed that the welfare rights in the ruling principles of Kuomintang were also a kind of socialism. He was confused that the supposed right-wing Kuomintang was suggesting socialism and hence started reading more about socialism. At the time, Terry witnessed the law interpretation incident in 1999 that sought to deprive mainland-born children the right of abode in Hong Kong. "I have a sense of original sin from my middle-class background. My mum's family are living in mainland China. It doesn't make sense that they can't enjoy the same living standard as I do in Hong Kong. We are from the same Chinese family. I don't think I deserve the life I have right now." This reflection motivated Terry to run for Student Union in university, which traditionally was critical of capitalism. "The connection of the student union caused me to easily got in touch with other left-wing social movement organizations (those that John was involved in). They were

talking about globalization at the time. I joined some of their seminars and actions, and slowly understood their criticisms of capitalism."

The Praxis of a Grassroot University Student

Ally also joined the student union of Chinese University. Born into a grassroots family, Ally was interested in labor issues. "I never had the idea of 'a social problem' before university education. I tended to understand my experience in a personal way and didn't realize it happened in the context of society. So studying theory helped me analyze the situation I face." Joining the student union was a way for her to discuss social issues and engage in social movements. She later also established the Grassroot Concern Group to further promote labor rights among university students.

Apart from personal experience and class position, the affiliation with the student union also facilitated more exposure to grassroots issues. As Terry has mentioned, left-wing social movement organizations would get in touch with student organizations and promote their activities. In Ally's case, the student union often held discussion sections on social issues and invited activists who were familiar with the topic, some of whom were also previous members of the student union. The historical connection and collaboration between student organizations and social movement organizations organically built an environment for students to be exposed to activism.

An Arbitrary Path to Social Movement

I have heard of Cole since year 1 from an article interviewing him on university and life choices. This article has been influencing me on whether I should commit to social movements ever since. For Cole, his engagement with social movement was arbitrary. Not having much interest

in politics, he bumped into an online forum introducing Christianity. The forum was unexpectedly academic, and even initiated offline political actions. Cole slowly realized the possibility of campaigns and actions. Cole joined the Student Christian Movement and Grassroots Forum out of curiosity and admiration for the experienced seniors. He later devoted himself to the Grassroots Forum, where grassroots issues like the lives of *kai fongs* (neighbours in the community) and community-building were discussed. Established by labor organizations activists, they wished to criticize the institutionalized knowledge and bridge grassroots issues with intellectuals and encouraged university students to reflect on their privileged positionality (許寶強，張秋玉，2015). “Members consent that the word grassroots in their name actually signified the working-class or proletarians.” They studied left-wing theories from Gramsci, Mandel, Hobsbawn and Thompson. Interpersonal relationships with organizers and kai fongs, and intellectual exploration were attractive and encouraged his more active position in social movement. It was a slow process of interaction rather than a dramatic turning point. Cole pointed out the reproductive relationship between student organization and social movement, “The Grassroots Forum wasn’t only a place for study groups or seminars. It aimed to equip students with theory and awareness, then transferred them to grassroots organizations as organizers, where students could practically gain experience. Then students came back to Grassroot Forum for debriefing to revise their theory on the basis of real-life experience. The social movement organizations built up connections with university students to train more activists in the future.

Study and Actions

After graduation, all three of them had a similar trajectory of continuing to study social science or labor relations, in response to their concern over class issues. Ally also had experience in labor organization. All three later chose to become teachers.

For Cole, the anti-WTO protest in 2005, when Korean farmers traveled to Hong Kong and protested the opening up of agricultural market in Korea by WTO which would severely harm local farmers, leading to violent suppression by the Hong Kong police. As Cole saw the whole of Hong Kong (police, media, general public) condemn the movement, "It's so hard to unite everybody when facing international class suppression. So I began to reflect on what I should do." In 2007, he was invited to be on the staff of Student Press in CUHK, which aspired to be an independent media in bringing social movement news. He found a community for discussion and further actions valuable to his praxis, which was to spread the idea of left-wing perspectives.

Compared to the 1970s, actions, and demonstrations were no longer rare and unfamiliar as more and more political groups were established. But the entry-level to become an activist was still very high, as most of the resources went to political parties and institutionalized organizations. The capacity pressure groups were unable to reach out to more people other than the target audience of their concerned issue, making their organizational power limited in certain aspects or geographical areas. At the same time, given the opening up of the political atmosphere with elections, social movements were marginalized. Major political actors were concentrating on handover issues and election politics. From my informants' perspective, the social atmosphere was lukewarm, and people willing to join actions were limited. So, becoming an activist relied on interpersonal relationships and experience in organizations. Targeting the resourceful university students in

knowledge and time, existing groups strategically trained them to be organizers in the hope that they could utilize their social influence. The composition of the groups was mostly elitist in their background and experience, although they kept on reflecting on their privileged position in the interaction with grassroots people. Social movement organizations were still small-scale and professionalized academically, which was unfamiliar to the general public.

The 3rd Generation: Growing up in the Social Movements

For the younger generation, the process of becoming a political subject was strongly connected to raising political awareness of the general public, as well as the booming era of the internet for information dissemination and action mobilization. The radicalization in direct actions also made social issues more accessible to the general public.

Since the 2003 anti-Article 23 protest, which stopped the implementation of the national security law, Hong Kong has entered a period of frequent protests. Cheng and Yuen (2018) described it as the "era of social movement", characterized by non-party-mobilized and bottom-up actions. Examples like the Anti-WTO Protest, urban preservation movements, the anti-railway movement, the dock strike, and the Umbrella Movement have motivated many thousands of citizens to the political arena. The media effect on mobilization was especially significant, given the weak mobilization networks by social movement groups (Lee & Chan, 2018). The wider variety of information dissemination on the internet allowed citizens to form groups and discuss issues in a more atomized way. At the same time, a trend of radicalization could be observed. Government statistics recorded that the number of public processions and meetings rose from 2,228 in 2006 to

7,529 in 2012, and it stayed above 6,000 from 2013 to 2015 (Lee & Chan, 2018). Hong Kong became a city of social movements.

The 2005 Anti-WTO Protest

Andrew is another famous activist who has always been on the protest scene. Not a member of any social movement organizations or student groups, the 2005 Anti-WTO protest was the political inspiration for Andrew. When the Hong Kong police were beating up the Korean farmers and the media were blaming them as rioters, Andrew was puzzled. “Those Korean farmers were living in poor condition. Why did they buy a ticket to Hong Kong and even break the law? There must be some reason behind it.” Andrew started reading and finding resources for the incident. Terms like neoliberalism and imperialism rushed into his mind. Then the Anti-Railway Link Movement was the first action that he participated in. Andrew was the first generation of netizens on the Golden Forum, an online community sharing news and jokes on current issues. In 2009, he wrote a post to call for protest at the Chinese Liaison Office. The motivation originated from his previous political inspiration, and also from feel unattracted by the traditional political parties. Andrew described the older political figures as old-school in their language and style, which encouraged him to do something by himself.

Calling on actions through online platforms may be seen as a common mobilization pattern of social movements today, but it was not the case in 2009. “Those who had joined any kind of actions must have been associated with social movement organizations. I was the only self-motivated participant. Later I learnt that my online post got big attention from those groups as no one knew me.” Organizing weekly protests online eventually became a routine. What turned

Andrew into a full-time activist was the confrontation with police. As a radical protester who often used violent strategy, being arrested and staying in custody could happen weekly, which was difficult and tiring for a full-time worker. Then he worked as a legislative council assistant. “If I really got arrested, they would understand it. The working environment was also free. I could skip work to protest for days.”

The 2010 Anti-Railway Protest

Unlike other members, Adrian was politicized overnight. Born into an upper-middle-class family that earned their living solely through investment, Adrian did not have a clear concept of “work” when he was young. Politics was also vague, as related to his family being politically apathetic. His mentality as a child was that of a typical utilitarian Hong Konger – celebrating capitalism, taking inequality for granted, and politics didn’t matter. However, during Adrian’s college years, teachers and classmates invited him to Choi Yeun Village, which faced demolition due to the new Rail Link in 2011. In Adrian’s mind, he expected peaceful negotiation for compensation. But in reality, when one of the villagers was out buying groceries, his house got dismantled. “It’s not the Hong Kong I know. It didn’t make any sense. What I learned in my whole life up until then couldn’t explain it.” The shock was so huge that he was immediately determined to spend his whole life on social movements, which he has done ever since. Adrian joined the Rebuilding Choi Yuen Village movement and later Left 21 through friends. “I’d never thought about the things that they said!” In Left 21, Adrian learned about capitalism, private property, ideology, and revolution, which provided an answer to the shocking scene he had wirnesses in the village.

The 2013 Dock Strike

Tin's secondary school life was in the booming internet era. She sometimes browsed the "Golden Forum", where jokes and news were posted. Exposure to new information cultivated Tin's sense of social awareness. Tin met a classmate who was eager to discuss social issues and complained about others being apathetic. Their shared feeling transformed into actions, like joining the June 4th Vigil, as well as promoting the Joint Committee of the 5 District Referendum Movement, which was a parliamentary advocacy group for universal suffrage. After entering university, Tin joined the student press. She was attracted by the rebellious and counter-cultural atmosphere. The editors staged random events to challenge the social order: during a sharing section in the theater hall, they suddenly pulled out toy guns to shoot noisy sounds, and read out lines from their orientation booklet at random. Her participation in the student press was a combination of rebellious psychology and social concern. "People in the student press were concerned about the underprivileged in such a cool way. So I joined them." Despite Tin's concern for the underprivileged during university, she didn't really have a vision of a social movement. Tin could also hardly understand the critiques of capitalism made by the other editors. From her understanding today, the core value of social movements is their bottom-up grassroots organization, where individuals are empowered with an autonomous ability to pursue their goals. The role of an organizer is to assist individuals to attain this status, and never be a leader to override or represent their interests and wishes. But as a university student who rarely stepped outside of school, the route to social change was not yet imaginable to her at that time.

The turning point was the 2013 Dock Strike at Kwai Tsing Container Terminal. Tin's friends from other student organizations mobilized her to support the strike. "I joined because my term of office in the student press was finally done….I still remember vividly: we arrived at the dock before

dawn and rushed to occupy the dock. I stayed there until afternoon and needed to go back to class. I had a mixed feeling. I wanted to see what would happen and didn't want to leave. So I joined the occupation, stayed overnight, and started talking to the workers….I had huge sympathy for the workers and cried listening to their sharing. Their working conditions were so bad. Their meals were disgusting and expensive. The workers were earning profit for the company, how could they be treated this badly?" Tin built up a close relationship with the workers. Becoming friends with the grassroots workers was very new and special for her.

The impact of the strike turned Tin into a completely new person. Tin was originally a fashionable girl who would dress up well and wear makeup. After staying in the uncomfortable environment of the strike, where sleeping on the ground was common, Tin rediscovered an alternative form of beauty, whereby external appearance was no longer as important as she thought. Participating in the strike also changed Tin's path in life, from pursuing a conventional path to joining actively in social movements. Tin enrolled in the internship program of the Grassroots Development Centre (a community organization for workers) and Autonomous 8a (the Hong Kong Federation of Students – Resources Centre of Social Movements) after the strike. "I wanted to learn how to organize. The strike didn't just encourage me to be concerned for workers. It also convinced me that social changes through collective action and organization are the proper pathway."

The Era of Social Movement

In the 2010s, previously apolitical people became aroused by the debates and conflicts happening in the changing political environment of the Hong Kong-China relationship. With the more convenient use of the internet for mobilization, individuals began to avoid the leadership of

traditional parties, which failed to connect with the most concerning issues; people instead adopted their own bottom-up mobilization and direct-action strategies. The new scale of participation and strategy was unprecedented in social movements.

From the three generations of experience we have such examined, we can see how the social atmosphere, social movement organizations, and individual choices were intertwined. The political crisis in Hong Kong allowed the formation and actions of various groups, which allowed the recruitment of individuals. But without their personal reflection and interpersonal relationship with active members, they also wouldn't have chosen this pathway for their lives.

3. The Establishment of Left 21

Left 21 was formed in response to what activists saw as the limitation of Hong Kong's mainstream political discourses, namely the tendency to define democracy as a non-material concern, and to explain ideological conflicts as generational differences. To understand the establishment of Left 21, we must look into the political discussions of the late 2000s.

The generational framework originated from a book called *Four Generations of Hong Kong People* (四代香港人) by sociologist Lui Tai-lok in 2007. Using the concept of class formation and social changes (趙永佳，陳健民，2010), the book highlights the characteristics of different generations. For example, Lui describes the new generation born after the 1980s as enjoying a stable social environment but is also limited by the saturated society controlled by elder generations in the upper classes. The generational framework was widely disseminated and interpreted to understand the rising trend of social movements.

The book sparked huge discussion in Hong Kong society. People started using generational frameworks to make sense of social movements, and some even adopted the label as an identity. The term "post-1980s youth" (millennials, or 八十後青年) first appeared in 2009, the 20th anniversary of the June 4th incident, when youths formed an organization called P-at-riot to "show youths' perspective on the June 4th incident and reposition nationalism movements through art activities" (P-at-riot，2009). By doing artwork, they tried to remind youth who were born after the incident to remember it. Despite the formation of the group, they were rather small-scale and unknown to the public. Subsequently, it was the anti-Hong Kong Express Rail Link movement in 2009 that made the post-1980s youth label well-known in public discourse.

In 2008, the government announced the construction of a high-speed railway that would link Guangzhou, Shenzhen, and Hong Kong. The construction work would lead to the dismantling of Choi Yuen Village. Protesters from P-at-riot and Local Actions (which actively joined the preservation of Queen's Pier and Star Ferry Pier) gathered and started a movement. They called for stopping the railway construction and land resumption of the village, criticizing the economic-oriented developmentalist ideology of Hong Kong. After internet promotion and demonstrations, the movement gained much public attention. More than 10,000 protesters assembled, paralyzing the operation of the Legislative Council, which was unprecedented in terms of scale and strategy. The non-party-led and direct-action-oriented political energy showed the changing mode of social movements from the earlier electoral and elitist model. As a result of this, the post-1980s youth becsme a popular label, as a movement identity that signified radical protesters, and a new independent political energy (杜振豪，2011).

The meaning of the label varied in the interpretation of different people, with some referring it to the post-colonial urban experience, and others to democratic values. Chan King Fai (2010), a vocal figure among the protesters, stressed locality, particularly in preservation movements like Queen's Pier, Star Ferry Pier, and the Choi Yuen Village protests. He explicitly denied the generational distinction written in the label, but stressed the local experience of every individual in Hong Kong. He believed that urban experience was actually multi-generational, given the culture they wished to preserve was complex, ever-changing, and different for everyone in the city. This discourse was also associated with democratic values. The scope of post-1980s youth thus widened beyond the urban preservation movement, focusing on its anti-authoritarian characteristics, urging for democratic development, and concern for social issues (小鬼，2010).

But this interpretation did not spread effectively or reach a consensus among the public, as "urban experience and anti-colonialism" was academic jargon that hindered public understanding. As a result, some youths instead highlighted the generational element. Some used the term post-80s youth to distinguish themselves from baby boomers and other previous generations, who were deemed to be "utilitarian, politically apathetic, and satisfied by the economic boom", or "people with vested interests who are unwilling to change the unequal and unjust society", that had emerged in the rapid developing economic era of Hong Kong. The older generation, who had gone through the expanding economic order and wider social mobility, were now in the upper class with political and economic power. They were seen as the cause of social problems for youths.

As the new social movements started using direct action, even having violent clashes with police, it opened up the possibility for non-party-led and non-electoral-oriented models of action. In the previous model of political actions, annual protests like the June 4th Vigil and July 1st were led by traditional political parties, which possessed the most resources and gained the most attention. The political energy was usually directed into elections and votes, marginalizing the position of grassroots organizations and bottom-up social movements. The youth-leading and direct-action strategies were often positioned in contrast to the election and elitist representations of the political figures from traditional political parties. These images from "the older generation" were blamed for their "conservative, failure to fight for democracy" (林匡正，2010). Hence, social mobility, political parties and social movements were now absorbed into the framework of generational identity.

While the post-1980s youths were gaining more attention, counter-arguments emerged. The government quickly framed their motivation as economic. For example, after the anti-Hong Kong Express Rail Link movement, some government officials highlighted the stagnant social mobility and high property price problem, trying to explain youths' anger in terms of a dim economic future and failure in life expectations. Following this argument, some claimed that they were "disrupting social order simply because they were unemployed, the losers who fail to survive in competition". Many of the protesters were irritated by the social mobility argument and rebutted by saying "Pursuing justice isn't about poverty. Some of us even quit our decent jobs to join a social movement." They explained their counter-argument in terms of generational conflict: the boomers only cared about economic development, they said, but now the post-1980s youth were more progressive, and were concerned about environmental issues and cultural

diversity, which had a higher priority than economic value (林輝，2010). The youths felt misunderstood and even indignant when their social participation was correlated with economic and material factors (古永信，2010). They felt that democratic values should be pure and spiritual, something more important than money.

Apart from the discussion in media and public events, scholars' research was also used for the construction of generational conflict discourse. The post-materialism framework was first suggested by Inglehart (1990) to describe the shift in generational values that accompanies changing economic development. The theory assumes that after fulfilling material needs like food and physical safety, people start to pursue spiritual values like freedom of speech and civil participation in policy-making. Inglehart therefore proposed that younger generations in developed industrial societies tend to accept post-material values more than the previous generations, given their better-off environment. Wong and Wan (2009) collected survey data in 1992 and 2007 and concluded that Hong Kong was increasingly inclined towards post-materialism. Post-material values were also found to be associated with the 'new politics' and democracy. Lee and Tang (2014) through statistical data further confirmed that there was a shift in post-materialist values in the younger generation. In fact, academic research has not given definitive proof of the correlation between generations and political opinion. Nevertheless, the idea of post-1980s youths and post-materialism has been widely acknowledged and has been widely used by media and in public discourse. According to Wisenews, from 2007-2012, there were nearly 10,000 articles mentioning "post-materialism" and "post-1980s youths."

Left 21 as the Revival of Class Analysis

What was the position of leftists in Hong Kong given the emergence of this new political identity? After the anti-Hong Kong Express Rail Link movement, some left-leaning activists, apart from post-1980s youths, held an evaluation session to revise the goal of the movement, the strategies used, the public discourse and representations of the movement, the participation of members, and further planning. The aim of the session was to make improvements and come up with more consensus among members. In the meeting, they focused on the new trend of social movement and, more importantly, criticized the post-materialism and generational conflict discourse.

Terry, one of the founding members of Left 21, still remembers how popular the post-materialism discourse was during the anti-Hong Kong Express Rail Link movement. “In the assembly, some opponents attacked the participants by saying they’re unemployed and uneducated. Then the host simply said they all have a job or a degree. I was so uncomfortable and irritated. How could they reinforce the logic of the attack?” By defending themselves in terms of their good education and career, the protesters indirectly agreed with the opponents’ presumption that the underprivileged shouldn’t advocate for their rights or start any social actions. The logic implied a hierarchical dichotomy between “the employed and the unemployed”, and “people with university degrees and those without”, where the former identity was superior. In this way the protesters exposed their class perspective hidden in the post-1980s youth label, which was a de facto middle-class identity, rather than the generational conflict presented in the name. This is why they emphasized the “decent life of protesters” rather than proudly embracing grassroots people aa the subjects of the movement. The problem was obvious: on one hand, the protesters wished to rebel against social injustice, but on the other hand, they were denying economic and materialistic interests as the goal of the protest, but pursuing “higher values” like democracy, claiming themselves post-materialistic.

In other words, there was an evasion of economic inequality in the discourses and actions of the protestors. Their understanding of democracy excluded economic equality.

The founding members described the paradox as a lack of class perspective. Terry recalled, “I remember talking to a grassroots construction worker who was an active member in a trade union. The supposed politically aware worker felt frustrated with the local culture preservation movement. He complained about how he was supposed to sustain his job when the movement was stopping the construction work.” Terry was also skeptical of the cultural preservation argument within the anti-railway movement, “I didn’t really oppose the construction of the railway. I only joined the movement due to the deprivation of living rights of villagers in Choi Yuen Village. They were the people sacrificed under this development. The organizers of the movement only talked about countryside sentiment (鄉土情懷), which was mixed with xenophobic localism and segregation between Hong Kong and China.”

Another founding member, Cole, had similar concerns about limited workers’ voices, although he did remember the participation of workers in the anti-railway movement. For instance, a member of the trade union of construction workers gave a speech at the assembly, saying that the railway was not cost-effective, and a railway ticket would be too expensive for grassroots citizens (左翼21，2011). However, Cole felt that workers were only in a supporting role to the post-1980s youth, instead of being main participants. “Why did the protesters stress their generational identity? Wasn’t the movement for everyone, no matter what their age?”

At the evaluation section among leftists, there was a consensus that the labor and class perspective was marginalized or even absent. Terry summarized the stance of leftists toward the post-1980s youth and post-materialism discourse in an article (左翼 21，2020). As he wrote,

> "The left-wing wouldn't reject or ignore cultural values, but what is core to left-wing analysis is economic structure. Within the discussion of post-materialism, leftists were situated in an embarrassing position. Equality, unity, and democracy are the foundation of left-wing movements. This is also why we've been criticizing capitalism, a system that violates all these values. And the narrowing social mobility (that the post-1980s youths were also concerned about) is exactly the result of capitalism. But we don't simply ask for more upward mobility opportunities, because ultimately, it is still endorsing a system that divides people into winners and losers. Even if there are more upward mobility opportunities, it doesn't mean that the oppressed and the exploited no longer exist in our society. So, when we're talking about youths' radicalization, I think it is important to emphasize the economic oppression factor to the youth."

Responding to both the post-materialism discourse and the counter-argument concerning low social mobility, the left wing didn't consider them contradictory but combined both elements. They began to identify capitalism as a problem that hindered people from pursuing democracy and equality. The left as an alternative could rearticulate the civil values and economic demand at the same time, as well as connect to the wider realm of working-class people, who have been excluded in the public discourse of democracy.

At the meeting, activists decided to start a left-wing organization to engage in the social debate. In June 2010, after several meetings, Left 21 was founded. The main component of the group included members from the Student Press of CUHK, the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions, and various Chinese labor NGOs.

4. The Leftist Alliance: What Does the Left Mean?

As the official website of Left 21 containing their articles and statements is currently unavailable due to inactive operation, one of the members kindly sent me some internal documents and meeting minutes. The most eye-catching document is a picture of around 30 people holding their fists with a banner that says "Left-wing Camp 2010". It was the camp for preparation work. Imitating the Communist Manifesto, they published the Sai Kung Manifesto, which describes the nature, stance, and goals of the group (Sai Kung was the location of their preparation camp).

Left 21 as an Ideological Promotion Organization

Because the political conflicts were becoming more severe in the city, members believed that a left-wing organization was inevitable. But what position exactly would the organization take within the civil society? Would it be a labour organization? A student organization? A political party?

If left-wing means that the working class should seize the political power of the state, then should Left 21 become a labour organization to advocate for labour's right and facilitate workers' struggles? The idea was quickly rejected due to the potential competitive relationship with other

existing labour organizations, like the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions and the Neighbourhood and Workers' Service Centre. As members were from various backgrounds, including students, intellectuals and NGOs workers, not everyone was equipped with the organizing skills, capacity, and positionality to engage with industrial workers; some of the Left 21 members were already from these labour organizations. It was not wise for the new group to waste energy and resources to compete with those organizations. Therefore, there was a division of labour between the two types of groups: the trade unions were to organize workers; Left 21 was to organize students and youth.

When we once again look into the context, the biggest crisis that led to the establishment of Left 21 was the post-materialism discourse, which lacked class perspective. As members noted in one of the discussions,

> The post-materialism discourse implies the stigmatization or even pathologization of pursuing one's own interests….Believing movements as non-material is a kind of idealism, which easily result in the omission of protesters' class positions and material basis.. (What confrontation would happen if workers opposed protesters' actions next time?)….
>
> But "common sense" isn't static. Intellectuals, cultural workers, and media writers have produced countless discourse of "common sense" for the anti-railway link movement….If the post-1980s youths decontextualized and refused

> their class position, then it is our job to promote class analysis as common sense (階級分析常識化) (21 2010).

As a result, members positioned themselves as a discourse production organization to absorb and push the new political energy leftward, and to rearticulate class perspective in future social movements. From the Sai Kung manifesto (2010), Left 21 set up the following action goals:

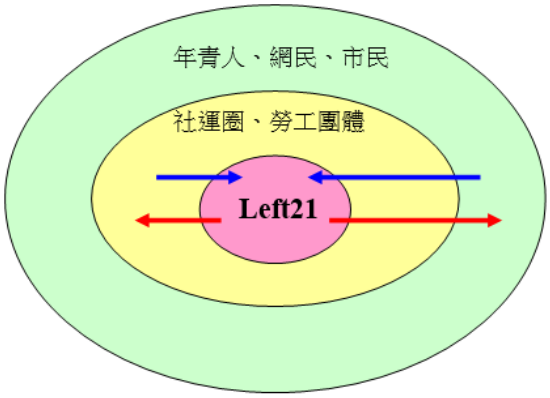
> *Near-term: Promote left-wing ideology, get involved in social movements, support and facilitate the political-economic struggles of the working class in Hong Kong and China*
> *Middle-term: Support the establishment of democratic political parties representing working-class interest in Hong Kong*
> *Long-term: Unite global anti-capitalism left-wing power and construct democratic socialism*

Leftward Leverage

Despite the fact that Left 21 aimed at public education on left-wing ideology, Ally mentioned their intentional avoidance of having a mass organization. Members were to join Left 21 through a referral and consensus system, which meant they were mostly students, intellectuals, and NGOs workers. Why did they do this? Ally stressed that as left-wing was still a weak power in society, if members were not required to agree on certain principles like anti-capitalism before joining or being recognized by other members, the group would only become another pan-democratic organization that would lose its stance. Left 21 would lack the capacity to do in-depth organization

if it had a large number of members. In the design of the group, targeting existing activists in the close circle provided leftward leverage. By joining Left 21, the overlapping members from trade unions and student organizations could form a more solid left-wing stance, and then spread this in their own groups. However, if the members were already left-leaning in the first place, why hadn't they promoted their agenda within their workplace or interpersonal circles previously? As Ally explained, "Members were already left-wing in a broad sense, but Left 21 could shock them with more issues. Their stance could be consolidated especially when people with similar ideas gathered. It was an interactive process and identity building could encourage their motivation." Terry also observed the necessity to gather this dispersed left-leaning power. "Some labour organizations never defined themselves as left-wing. Some also said that left-wing perspective wasn't necessary to labour movements. It's fine if they only fought for labour's rights, but not building socialism in the long-run."

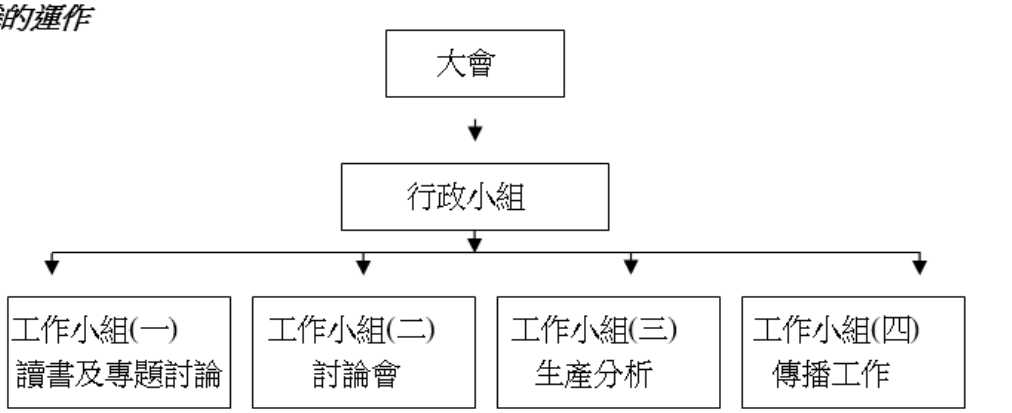
The following graph included in meeting minutes explained the position of Left 21. It was expected that the social movement sphere could be pushed leftward by Left 21, and with their influence, the whole society could be influenced by the left-wing agenda:



Yellow circle: social movement sphere, labour organizations; green circle: youths, netizens, citizens

Its ideological production and leftward leverage explained the structure of Left 21. Firstly, as a left-wing organization promoting equality, members deliberately avoided posts like chairperson. Instead, the general meeting was where decisions were made, which consisted of all members. It was to deal with Left 21's external stance and principles, as well as development goals. For daily executive and administrative affairs, the secretariat would be elected annually through the general meeting and various working groups. Working groups were where ideological production and actions took place. The initial working groups mainly included study groups, discussion sections, discourse production, and media groups. More groups were later developed including labour, China, youth, education, gender, and action. Members were encouraged to join at least one working group. Monthly meeting was held to report on updates for each group.

2) 組織的運作



Translation (from top to bottom and from left to right): general meeting; secretariat; study group; discussion group; discourse production working group; media working group.

What Does "Left" Mean?

According to the regulation of Left 21 (2011), their principles were to "advocate equality, unite left-wing power in Hong Kong, and promote left-wing discourse". Their basic stance included "opposing neoliberalism, criticizing the capitalistic market economy, focusing on class perspectives, reducing social inequality, advocating internationalism, promoting gender and race equality, and concern with ecological development". For thse who were unpoliticized, the stance appeared to be significantly left-leaning. But within the left-leaning spectrum, the stance could only lead to questions. What did capitalism mean? How could the theory interact with current issues? Who was their enemy to struggle with? What was the social blueprint that they were pursuing?

When Left 21 positioned itself as a left-wing alliance, it was inevitable that members held a diverse or unclear definition of what the left meant. The agenda, target audience, goals, and actions among members varied to a large extent. When I asked my informants what left meant to them, their answers were divided into different aspects. The first significant division was over whether or not to include a criticism of capitalism. About half of them gave typical text-book-like interpretations and talked about class perspectives and socialism. Their main focus in real life politics was to concern the grassroot and working-class people. They also regarded capitalism as a political-economic system that contained production and distribution processes. So it was necessary to eradicate the relation of exploiting class and exploited class. The market system should not be the

major method of resource distribution, and private property should be abolished. Democratic resources distribution and political system should be established.

However, some members did not share this stance in the framework of capitalism but took a humanitarianism approach, such as focusing on neglected minority and power relations. And some did not talk about ideology and theory, but instead focused on promoting left-wing ideas in actions and discussion. One answer, Tin's, entailed her denial as a leftist. From Tin's understanding, left referred to a centralized economic system, but she had doubts. "I was confused, and now I think that I'm not a leftist. Workers indeed build our society and should be respected. But I actually don't agree with central planning and distribution. I believe that social changes should be done through networking and bottom-up movements to regain people's autonomy. I'd only claim myself as a leftist when the xenophobic localist attacked my left-wing friends." Tin was not officially a member through the referral system but was employed as a part-time staff. Her denial as a leftist was especially unusual because, supposedly, the part-time staff who took up the management of daily affairs were expected to be in alignment with the groups' ideology. She did not see it as problematic, because the group employed her, seeing her participation in strikes and actions, and found that they were compatible working together. And the fact that Left 21 did not want to create a high entry level also made Tin's non-membership rather normal.

The Double-edged Sword

Compared to traditional left-wing labels like the Leninists, Trotskyists, Maoists or Anarchists, the spectrum in Left 21 was rather vague; it was doubtful whether members could really be located on a political spectrum. It was well-aware to everyone that members held heterogeneous stances. The

obvious advantage of this was to attract as many left-leaning and interested youth as possible. Despite differences, members at least agreed on advocating for all kinds of marginalized people's rights and critical of xenophobia toward mainland China. The founding members expected that disagreement could be dealt through internal democratic discussion sections and meetings. Since the ultimate goal of the group was to enhance left-wing power, compromise in specific issues could be made. Left 21 was deemed to be an important place to keep active teens occupied and educated through class analysis.

However, in reality, it was difficult to have mutual tolerance. Most informants agreed that the heterogeneous nature of the organization was a double-edged sword in the development of Left 21. Some members challenged others' "incompetence" in their left-wing stance. "Even among our members, they weren't necessarily critical of capitalism. They only joined Left 21 because the group encouraged their advocacy on marginalized issues, like Tibetan's rights, which was omitted by the mainstream (pan-democratic) organizations. But once we have collaborated, they would soon leave as our goals were too different." The loose organization stance also might have deterred the more determined people from joining. Cole observed that when other groups had a stronger cohesion, more progressive agenda and actions, or clearer principles, youth wouldn't join Left 21. It was not radical enough for those eager to do direct actions, and not theoretical enough for academics. Therefore the participation of some traditional student organizations was lacking.

Dave was a member from a left-leaning political party, whom I connected with through common friends. With experience in the Committee for a Workers' International, he refused to join Left 21 at the start due to its vague stance. He described Left 21 as having a "lack of guiding principles

and loose in stance". "200 years of Marxism already had countless branches and routes, but I doubt whether Left 21 members agree with the basic principles of Marxism. People only gathered with basic common principles, which were extremely vague." His experience in CWI, which was an international Trotskyist organization, required strict learning and actions, and more synchronization in basic world view and stance. But the condition of Left 21 was far from the traditional leftist organization. Members of Left 21 maintained that strict requirement of left-wing ideology would only lead the group to isolation and impracticality. Some felt that existing left-wing organizations only uphold the purest and highest principles regardless of the social atmosphere; they could never create any genuine influence nor build up wider connections and allies. But Left 21's focus on actions and movement in return was also viewed as vague and loose, and not principled enough in the eye of "lefter" people.

The situation was even more complicated when there was overlapping identity. Andy jokingly talked about how serious the problem was, "In 2014, the social movement organizations gathered and held a football match. There were 4 teams joining: League of Social Democrats, Neighbourhood and Worker's Service Centre, Labour Party and Left 21. A lot of the members could simply enter all the teams given their membership." It didn't matter for members to freely choose their represented team in a football match, but it was problematic when they faced the daily routines and responsibilities in various organizations. For those who had overlapping identities, Left 21 was typically not their prioritized organization. This resulted in students and scholars taking up the main responsibility in the group. Under this circumstance, how was the goal of pushing civil society leftward to be achieved?

5. The Leftist's Spring

To understand the impact of Left 21's social participation, we have to first understand the pattern and route of social movement for the past 40 years, as well as the relationship between the pan-democrats and the left-leaning groups. After the rise of anti-colonial and nationalistic social movements in the 1970s, the 1980s saw the more mature formation and collaboration of pressure groups and communication organizations (Lui and Chiu, 1997). The nominating system in councils and the absence of elections, which restricted the opportunity structure for activists within closed formal political channels, encouraged alliance and collaboration in direct action among different groups. However, the bottom-up left-wing social movement was undermined by the capitalistic colonial authority, which tried to depoliticized contentious politics into administrative issues. The motivation and organizing power of social movements was not as strong as the past (Lui and Chiu, 1997).

The changing power structure also affected the political agenda at the time. The 1980s was the time for deciding the future of colonial Hong Kong after 150 years of British rule. Due to severe racial and class inequality, and the lack of democracy, anti-colonial sentiment was strong among local activists and intellectuals. They mostly held hope of democratization with Hong Kong's return to China (蔡子強，1998); this was a consensus in progressive civil society, including labour organizations, legal scholars, and social workers (馬嶽，2012). Since the Sino-British Joint Declaration was signed, Hong Kong's return to China became the inevitable future. The democrats considered that "Hong Kong People Ruling Hong Kong, High Degree of Autonomy" as a political opportunity to share power with the Chinese government; their political aspiration was set to be "achieving democracy" (羅永生，2018).

Engels once used the term “parliamentary cretinism” to criticize those who believed social changes could be achieved solely through parliamentary means instead of class struggle. Law (羅永生，2018) made a similar criticism of those democrats gladly accepting a handover that inherited the capitalistic and undemocratic British colonial system without any reforms. “They set the foundation of the handover with middle-class subjectivity, describing the middle class as the major advocates of the democratic movement. The discourse deliberately depicted democracy as being for middle-class professionals, who pursue reforms instead of revolution, as a kind of administrative management ideology….It was to send a signal to the Chinese government and the capitalists that the democratic movement wouldn’t touch on sovereignty and class issues. In other words, these rational, practical and professional middle-class characteristics wouldn’t be a tool for class struggles and Hong Kong independence, but a tool for improving the ruling of Hong Kong.”

As a result, with the opening of electoral politics in the 1990s, activists, organizations and movements were drawn into votes and councils (呂大樂，1994). The agenda of social movements shifted to formal political participation and hence parliamentary democratization. The power of progressive politics was absorbed into the administrative apparatus, consequently marginalizing the momentum of grassroot and community groups once captured by the New Left. The suppression by the pan-democrats of the more radical decisions of Trotskyists groups in mass movements (葉蔭聰，2015) also showed the competition between the pan-democrats and the New Left as to political power. The situation changed after the 1997 financial crisis, when redistribution and livelihood issues became more important. There has never been a clear historical lineage of leftists in Hong Kong. The current leftists in Left 21 were far from

descendants of the 1970s Trotskyists and anarchists; they originated in response to fragmented historical incidents instead of passing on a firm political agenda and stance (劉璧嘉, 2021).

The Peak: Class War in Hong Kong (2011-2013)

Discourse Production

2011-2013 was the time when Left 21 gained the most action, exposure, and influence. The beginning of Left 21 stuck to the discourse production route. According to its social media, monthly discussion sessions took place and weekly online articles were produced. Topic could be divided into four categories: responses to local issues, international news, historical discussion, and basic left-wing perspective education. Examples of topics included developer hegemony, the Joint Committee of the 5 District Referendum Movement, an introduction to community and student movements, the labour movement in China, and the labour party in the UK.

As a new group, Left 21's online publications didn't gain much attention. The audience's reactions were below 10 likes on Facebook, most of whom were existing members. The discussion sessions were the major activity of the organization. The internal sessions targeted the existing activists and members to enhance the political agenda of Left 21; the external sessions sought to attract new potential members, expand the connection network through invited guests, and train members' abilities to hold discussions. After the discussion, the publishing and media group would post a summary online.

Direct Actions

After a year of preparation and establishment, Left 21 was much more active in 2011 with more petition and actions, along with their regular discussion sections.

Resist Official-Business Collusion, Prevent Catastrophe Protest (抗擊官商勾結，防止車毀人亡遊行)

The Chief Secretary for Administration Office Henry Tang Ying-yen criticized the post-1980s activists, saying that they would cause catastrophe to Hong Kong (剛愎自用勇往直前，會導致香港車毀人亡). Left 21 quickly drafted a petition and gained more than 6500 signatures (2011):

> *Catastrophe originates from the domination of political and economic power by a few bureaucrats and tycoons. They are the developers who collude with the government, in order to monopolize land and push up property prices. They are the parasites in Hong Kong. The officials fawn on tycoons …. just to win small-circle elections and gain benefits after retirement.*

Left 21's petition attributed Hong Kong's problems to the existing political-economic order. The petition explicitly refused to adopt a framework of generational conflict.

Members also organized a "Resist Official-Business Collusion, Prevent Catastrophe" protest (抗擊官商勾結，防止車毀人亡) that had more than 200 participants. Singing the Internationale and shouting slogans like "Class War instead of Generational Conflict" (不是世代之爭，而是階級鬥爭), and "Corporatism monopolizes wealth. Small-circle election brings catastrophe" (大財團

壟斷冚家富貴，小圈子選舉車毀人亡), protesters marched through the most prosperous street in Central. The host described the intense class conflict along the walk: “The city was built by workers, but the wealth was enjoyed by the capitalists.” They stopped at the office of New World Development, Cheung Kong Asset Holdings Limited, and the Central Government Offices. “Let’s bow and light incense!” the host shouted. The procession was to imitate a funeral and pray for the end of monopoly and exploitation by corporations. At the end of the protest, participants held a discussion in front of the Central Government Offices.

Photo Credit: CY Alex, inmedia

Protesters lighting incense in front of offices of conglomerate companies. Retrieved from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q3NWYkAMg4c&ab_channel=GreenRadio

Occupy Central 2011[2]

After the 2011 Occupy Wall Street protests in the US in response to the financial crisis and plutocracy, the Occupy trend swept the globe to call for more equal societies. In Hong Kong, Left 21 and other groups occupied the plaza of HSBC headquarters in Central in the same year. Members gave speeches on the harm caused by speculators and the finance industry, and called for more welfare reform and the overthrow of capitalism (左翼 21，2011).

[2] Not to be confused with the Umbrella Movement/Occupy Central in 2014.

Left 21 initiated the Occupy Central action at HSBC. The banner reads: Anti-Capitalism, Occupy Central ,https://news.now.com/home/local/player?newsId=15085

It didn't appear to be a memorable action for most members, as they rarely mentioned it afterwards. Cole jokingly said that members only protested and couldn't occupy for months, as did other protesters, as "they couldn't bear the all-day-long discussion of the anarchists". But it was not as funny for the non-member, Dave. "Occupy Central was already very left-wing in agenda, but Left 21 didn't even try gain leadership in the movement, resulting in the dominance of the petty bourgeoisie (小資生活派)". Dave was indignant about the Left 21's inability in the action. "They had no clear goals."

Halloween Protest (講咩鬼－貧民哈囉喂之十月圍誠)

This protest too was in support of Occupy Central 2011. Adrian explained their route: “Traditional protests by other political parties and organizations hve been mostly held on Hong Kong Island, simply because, residents there were richer and could donate more money to the organizers. But we deliberately chose the route along Mongkok and Yau Ma Tei, districts where grassroot citizens live. We wanted to attract their attention when we talked about economic oppression.”

A protester cosplayed as the International Finance Centre. Photo credit: z503, inmedia.

HSBC, near the location of Occupy Central. Photo credit: z503, inmedia.

The 2013 Dock Strike.

This was the longest industrial strike since the handover. Workers provided accounts of the appalling working conditions and frozen pay: working 24-hour consecutively, no lunch hour, and no safety measures. Left 21 was the biggest supporting group in this action other than trade unions. While union organizers focused on strategy and negotiations, Left 21 acted as a discourse and promotion apparatus to gather support from the public. The striking workers were outsourced under the Hongkong International Terminals Ltd., which was part of the Li Kashing conglomerate. As the city's richest man, Li Kashing was an extremely significant icon for illustrating the inequality and exploitation by big businesses. Left 21 grasped the chance to articulate the strike into a problem of capitalism. As its 2013 petition stated,

Production can't rely on capital. Without the contributions of workers, the capitalists can never gain any wealth. We can see dignity from the striking workers — they are their own masters of production. They are asking for the reward they deserve after selling their labour..

Li Ka-shing is too powerful: nearly everyone in the city is working for him. It is the dock workers that suffer today. It will be us tomorrow. As part of the working people, we share the same interests.

In labour conflicts, organizers usually focused on working conditions and rights, and rarely phrased it in terms of distinctive class oppositions and exploitation, as the language is unfamiliar to the general public. So in this case Left 21s classic Marxist analysis of the working people and the capitalists was unprecedented. Left 21 gained huge public attention and sympathy by discursively connecting the monopoly of conglomerates, high property prices, and deteriorating living standards. Petitions and articles were published, and students demonstrated from the Cheung Kong Asset Holdings Limited to the dock in Kwai Chung. The significant influence can also be reflected in the 9 million dollars of strike fund contributions from the general public.

Students wore shirts and headbands with slogans of "support the strike" and "not a slave". One of them sat in the cage to represent the poor condition of dock workers.

https://theinitium.com/article/20190326-opinion-shks-social-movement-unionism/

The Alternative of Independent Left-wing Flag

For those members with experience in other organizations, these actions were especially memorable for them: they had never before shouted out such significant slogans of an anti-capitalism agenda on a protest scene. As Terry said, "We could finally rearticulate class conflict. I don't believe other political parties would shout 'anti-capitalism' out loud, not even the League of Social Democrats." Andy, a labour union organizer, explained the radical level of Left 21: "These actions could never happen in other groups. The organizations can't have such radical stances such as anti-capitalism. I still remember vividly in the Halloween protest, Left 21 members said that we're having a class war in Hong Kong. Then I told a friend that the youths in Left 21 dare to say things that we don't."

Indeed, Left 21 created more space for class analysis, enriching the goal of pursuing representative democracy which has been a dominating political agenda for the past 30 years in Hong Kong. "Left-wing" became a trendy idea at the time. Attracting many new members to Left 21. Members thought that the Dock Strike was especially symbolic. The language used in the petition and the strategy in action were not confined to purely labour disputes, but brought up more structural issues, like the monopoly of conglomerates, official-business collusion, and the political-economic problems of Hong Kong. Li Kashing was the key enemy stressed by promotional posters, not just because he was the boss of the dock, but because he symbolized the power structure of capitalism as the richest person in Hong Kong. A member who was in charge of the fund-raising section in the strike said, "I saw a grassroots housewife… probably one of those who would bargain for prices during grocery shopping. She took out $20 from her wallet and donated to the strike. There was really a feeling of class unity." This class power didn't only refer to solidarity among the striking workers, but also the solidarity among working-class people to support one another. The small act of donation reflected common interests and the common origin of oppression by capitalism.

The social conditions that allowed Left 21 to take a more radical stance was determined by their position as an ideology production organization, as compared to other front-line organizations or political parties. Andy compared his experience in the labour union and Left 21, "I wouldn't dare to talk about class war when I was in the trade union. Facing the workers, I would advocate for standard working hours and anti-sub-contracting measures. But would I dare to say that there can be no boss but only workers in our society? …I'd be really hesitant. It wasn't because the manager

set protocols. It was a kind of internalized self-restriction: Do people understand what I mean? Will they be averse to these ideas?"

Another reason for a restrained stance concerned calculations in elections. It was difficult to gain support and vote when organizers were too far away from the people in their ideas. As Andy said, "When Long Hair (Leung Kwok-hung, a famous Trotskyist) ran for election, he could at most call removing the privatization agent of estate management of public housing estates Link REIT, but he could never say 'nationalize it.'" A vivid example was Andrew To Kwan-hang from the League of Social Democrats, who lost the 2011 district council election to an unexperienced candidate, after he openly suggested that foreign domestic workers should have the right of abode in Hong Kong. This depicts the tension between electoral politics and grassroot social movements. From the comparatively high wages of legislative members being able to employ assistants as staff, to easily gaining focus from the media and having voting power on bills, elections mean resources, exposure and power. If labour organizations wished to make concrete changes, running for office is a tempting option. But at the same time, when awareness of class power has never been strong in Hong Kong, advocacy can only happen in elected councils rather than from civil society. Some activists only expected election to the council to be a tool to gain resources and exposure, but the tool ultimately became the final goal to pursue. Election news always attracts more attention than particular welfare issues. Even worse, goals like building an equal society have turned into a hurdle, such as Andy's concerns about harming election interests if he talked about his anti-capitalism agenda. This has in turn further marginalized organizations of grassroots workers.

Historically, the pattern and division of labour between activism and electoral politics was collaborative rather than oppositional (嶽，2014). Although the grassroot groups have been marginalized objectively, this didn't mean that they would separate their actions from electoral politics. Activists would explore and engaged with issues and crises, while council members would respond and raise those issues in formal meetings following activists' actions and media exposure. Therefore, despite disagreeing on the method to pursue democracy, legislators nevertheless had expectation from activists to make some changes in the councils. But when the power of lawmakers diminished with a more intransigent stance from the government, it became harder to expect successful advocacy. Activists in civil society on the one hand lost faith in elections; on the other hand, the stagnated political power structure facilitated the momentum of social movement, as people could also see the inefficiency of councils in the form of representative democracy.

Left 21 was determined not to join the election and chose to develop an alternative route of social movements through economic and social class issues. However, without the resources elected positions could bring, how exactly could it further expand its power? If it didn't engage in front-line organization with workers, nor join elections, where was its power and momentum to be found? The heterogeneity in members composition and stance was the biggest unresolved question haunting the rising group.

For members with overlapping organizational identities, their function in creating leftward leverage in civil society was not so effective. Although they agreed that when Left 21 suggested more progressive proposals on welfare reform, other groups could easily follow it, there was not enough division of labour between discourse production and front-line organization. When Left

21's work was rather vague and intellectual, such as holding discussion sessions and writing articles, trade union organizers felt it difficult to combine structural class analysis with their daily interactions with workers and neighborhoods. The organic collaboration couldn't take place as expected. Because the experienced activists were not the core members of Left 21, the major role went to students and scholars. 2011-2013 was when Left 21 rapidly expanded its member basis. Left 21 adopted the strategy of absorbing new members to engage radicalized youths with a left-wing agenda. The network of new members was mostly concentrated in college students, who were attracted to direct action. They took up massive responsibility in actions, from the protests mentioned above, to the frontline of weekly direct action such as erecting banners at the Cross-Harbour Tunnel during TV livestreams. But such momentum could not be maintained without a strong cohesion. When members had such diverse stances and understandings, challenges emerged, especially when the political atmosphere changed.

6. Changing Ideological Position of Civil Society

Recession: The Hated Leftards (2013-2016)

With increasing economic dependence in Hong Kong on China, China-Hong Kong conflicts started intensifying in the late 2000s. From the Mainland and Hong Kong Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement (CEPA), to the high-speed railway between Guangzhou, Shenzhen and Hong Kong, different economic aspects such as local industry, urban planning, and infrastructure enabled more trading and mobility between borders, but it also brought conflicts in daily interaction between the cities (羅永生，2014).

With the neoliberal policies and lack of welfare provided by the Hong Kong government, local people's anger and dissatisfaction with the economic situation became quickly framed as an ethnic issue between mainland China and Hong Kong. Public discourse rejecting immigrants from mainland China and blaming them for stealing resources increased in 2012. For example, with more mainland couples giving birth in Hong Kong to obtain permanent residence, netizens funded newspaper advertisements saying, "Hong Kong people have had enough" (香港人，忍夠了) and labelled mainlanders as locusts robbing the resources of local citizens (BBC, 2012). In response to the parallel traders from the Mainland flooding into the northern districts of Hong Kong, protesters called for actions to disturb them (SCMP, 2012). Right-wing xenophobic organizations were formed to express anti-China and anti-Chinese people sentiments. Localism was a reaction to increasing integration with China, and also a reaction against the methods and routes of the previous democratic movement. They opposed the rational, peaceful parliamentary methods of the pan-democrats in pursuing democracy, and advocated more violent confrontation. Their xenophobic sentiment led them to refuse the nationalistic framework of "One Country, Two System", and instead advocate self-determination or even Hong Kong independence.

The new political energy of xenophobic localism marginalized the earlier left-wing power. They called the pan-democrats 大中華膠 (a derogatory label for those endorsing Chinese nationalism), given their collaboration with the Chinese government. They called the leftists refusing xenophobia "leftards" (左膠) to mock on their "betrayal of Hong Kong's interest" (Ip, 2019). The two labels have been used interchangeably, as attacks employed by localists to challenge their political enemies without any well-defined meaning. With this attack, the left-leaning momentum

created by Left 21, and whether it could weather the crisis of right-wing politics despite the diverse composition of its members, was called into question.

Conflict: HKTV Assembly (「我要公仔箱 不要黑箱作業」遊行集會)

In 2013, the government refused to issue a free-to-air television license to Hong Kong Television Network (HKTV). Furious about the monopoly of the major television channel TVB, people gathered and demonstrated against the government's decision. Left 21 did not officially join the assembly, but, some members organized the actions on their own. In the assembly, the organizers encouraged the crowd to form discussion groups to voice out opinions, as a bottom-up form of negotiation. They also suggested demonstrating at the two exiting TV channels, TVB and ATV, to articulate their desires for a citizens' rights to media channel. Their leadership quickly sparked a backlash. Some participants rushed to the stage and stopped the hosts, criticizing them for "concealing failure and wasting morale, eventually benefiting the government" (以「階段性勝利」來掩飾抗爭失敗，不斷消耗民意，變相為政府和中共維穩), calling them leftards (鄭松泰，2013). Rumours of Left 21 starting fundraising in the name of HKTV and corrupting the donations spread. Left 21 (2013) clarified that fundraising claim was misinformation.

The crisis was a reflection of Left 21's inherently vague stance since its founding. Instead of blaming members for immature decision-making in the assembly (in fact, other members were tolerant of them and didn't expel their membership), the internal conflict revolved around the principles of social participation by Left 21. The reason why members joined the assembly on their own instead of under the name Left 21 was the unresolved opinion as to how Left 21 should view the HKTV incident. Some members were skeptical whether people should be defending HKTV,

because they considered the matter as a conflict between the government and capitalists. Given that the founder of HKTV, Ricky Wong Wai-kay, was a member of the Political Consultative Conference in Zhejiang Province, the government's refusal to issue the license was a political decision to counter the vast interest and power he represented. They thought that the discourse could hardly show the power struggles between the two parties but would be reduced to the "undemocratic decision of the government to suppress freedom of speech". It was not wise to join the action if people mistook capitalism and state power as the people's own voice.

Some media group members published the following poster on social media to show a more hands-off stance:

Translation: The audience might get more choice from the profit-oriented media, but it still isn't the power to change capitalism. Ricky Wong Wai-kay ending Spirit of Lion Rock; former member

of the Political Consultative Conference in Zhejiang Province become the business hero who confronts the government?

However, other members of Left 21 considered joining the movement even they weren't concerned about class issues; they sought to join as an organizing strategy to build up their reputation and attract new members. The part-time staff at the time advocated this the method. They felt anxious that in the face of radicalized citizens, the left-wing couldn't grasp the chance to establish a practical and workable social blueprint and path for struggle. They weren't satisfied with only doing discourse promotion and issue analysis, as if they were merely observers and researchers of capitalism. How these ideas and analysis could be transformed into workable actions and movements was an important issue for them and for many members.

In fact, the organizational method has been a long debate. As mentioned earlier, some members wished to engage in as many movements as possible to spread the left-wing stance and absorb more members. Other members were uneasy with this rapid expansion, and felt that new members weren't equipped with enough knowledge to do a thorough analysis using the left-wing perspective. They wished to slow down the recruitment process and focus on training current members first. The fact that Left 21 was not participating in the HKTV assembly was a result of this unresolved conflict.

In the end, the part-time staff member who insisted on movement engagement resigned from Left 21. Some members thought that this staff member's resignation has directly led to the diminishment of Left 21. As the work in Left 21 was all voluntary, members with full-time jobs

inevitably participate less. It was the part-time staff who did most of the planning and coordination, from dealing with administrative documents to engaging in front-line organization. When the staff member left the group, Left 21 quickly lost its exposure as a social movement and ability to absorb new members. Externally, the changing political atmosphere also brought attacks and stigmatization of Left 21. After the HKTV assembly incident, and with its clear stance in its name of 'left', Left 21 was attacked by localists as being "leftard," online and at protests. It became much more difficult to attract new members with the organization name. This internal and external crisis led to the unreadiness of Left 21 for subsequent movements.

The anti-North East New Territories New Development Areas Planning Movement

In 2007, the government announced the development plan, "Hong Kong 2030: Planning Vision and Strategy," aiming to provide a framework for future land use in New Territories to address long-term housing demands. The plan would develop the northeast New Territories, in areas such as Kwu Tung North ( ) and Fanling North. In 2014, activists organized actions and movements to oppose the plan. Many Left 21 members joined the movement. However, Left 21 again avoided participating in the name of Left 21 because, without the coordination of the staff, other members lacked the vision to do group promotion. Another reason, more importantly, was again the unclear stance and interpretation of the left-wing perspective. The other leading figures of the movement were from the post-1980s youths, whose post-materialism and local discourse were challenged historically by Left 21; its members distanced themselves from those activists. Some post-1980s youths claimed that avoidance of China-Hong Kong conflict would miss the chance to build up the discourse on democratic city planning (陳劍青，2013). For Left 21, this was dangerous: xenophobic localism could be easily incubated within the complex language of

"autonomy of local economic rights".. So in online articles by Left 21, they mostly stressed the problem of land resumption of villages, developmentalism, and official-business collusion on land selling (左翼 21，2014), instead of the China-Hong Kong conflict. Thus, Left 21 did not engage in the movement with its name. With its inability to directly respond to the localism discourse, it has slowly lost its influence on public discourse.

The Umbrella Movement 2014

With the Chinese government's promise of universal suffrage upon nomination by a broadly representative nominating committee in the Basic Law, the pan-democratic parties had been advocating for opening up a fair and equal Chief Executive election since the 1980s. However, in 2014, the Chinese government announced a proposal of reforms to the Hong Kong electoral system, which would include screening of the Chief Executive candidates by the Chinese government. Student organizations started the occupation in Mong Kok, Admiralty and Causeway Bay to demand civil nominations and unscreened election.

Once again, members of Left 21 didn't join the movement under their organizational name. In the statements and articles it has published, it held reservation to some strategies and patterns of the Occupy Central/Umbrella movement. As to the basic principle, although Left 21 agreed on the pursuit of universal suffrage for election of the Chief Executive given the spirit of democracy (左翼 21，2014), it nevertheless stressed class perspectives. It proposed that democratic values and livelihood issues should be combined, with democracy not being confined to political systems like elections, but also used to reduce the wealth gap and achieve a more equal society through welfare reform. Some articles also criticized the organizers' strategy to ally with local capitalists, which

ultimately did not share the same interest as the people (左翼 21，2014), and called for allying with the mass of grassroots people (左翼 21，2014).

Although some members devotedly joined the movement by visiting every apartment in Mong Kok district to try to convince residents to support them, the intense disagreement between supporters and opponents of the occupation of Mong Kok threatened to become violent confrontation. Members believed that it was better not to use the name Left 21, because the name itself already implied association with the word "leftard" for those unfamiliar with the group. And in fact, Left 21 was indeed labeled as "leftard" after the previous disagreement in HKTV assembly. The stigma of "leftard" was too destructive; it was foreseeable that arguments and physical conflict could occur once this name was used.

Between the Electoral-oriented Pan-democrats and the Xenophobic Localists

At this point, the heterogeneity of Left 21 was clearly a barrier to their social participation. Without a clear stance and path in the face of changing social conflicts, the class perspective given by Left 21 was insufficient, and too complicated to counter the right-wing. This can be shown from their avoidance of discussion of China-Hong Kong relations except their stance of anti-xenophobism, and the class perspective criticism of representative democracy. Should they join the movement? If so, what discourse should they promote? Is there any acceptable compromise in radicalness they should offer to the unpoliticized public? Was their class analysis drawn from historical evidence rather than adopting western experience; was it convincing enough to draw a positive response?

Apparently, the new-born organization, with members of diverse understanding of the left and with super busy front-line organizers, was unready for the new issues and situation. Especially when Left 21 identified their enemy and targeted "capitalism, neoliberalism, and the unfair socio-economic structure", this seemed "idealistic and unattainable" for some members. Organizing protests to rearticulate class discourse might be influential for those attending for the first time, but doing this monthly appeared meaningless to create social-changes. From an internal discussion document, member couldn't help but ask for the concrete goals of the movement:

> *When class conflicts were severe, the society started becoming concerned with the China-Hong Kong conflict….The left-wing camp has a fatal defect: we don't have a clear stance. A lot of the young left-wing friends didn't answer whether they felt Hong Kong could afford immigrates, or on the issue of setting boundary and borders. Instead, we use the framework of an international standpoint to challenge the right-wing as racists spreading hatred, or even fascists. Sometimes we are critical of the crowd. But for the angry crowd, what does the left-wing advocate? They don't know, and they only know that left-wingers called them fascisst. That is the reason why we are criticised as unrealistic.*

In 2015, Left 21 held internal meetings to discuss their basic principles. Instead of having heated debate, the process went smoothly. Active members guessed that the dissenters didn't feel it was an effective conversation. And even with these principles, how they could be executed was another difficult issue.

In fact, similar problem of lacking strong leadership and action plans happened in other groups as well. The Civil Human Rights Front, the alliance of more than 50 pan-democratic organizations which held yearly demonstration on July 1st, could also never effectively coordinate the participation of groups with different stances and positions. In an interview, a member discussed their limitations, that they failed to come up with solid stances and action plans on certain issues (2014). Even if they could, the stance was not so meaningful as it was not binding to organizations' voting in Legco or other strategy in actions. As a result, the alliance failed to reduce divergence among members, but could only provide a platform for discussion. Left 21, consisting of members of various left-leaning groups, was actually a smaller version of the Civil Human Rights Front, and could hardly hold members together synchronically, or effectively deal with their disagreements. What is the point of staying in a loose group? Members naturally went to other influential organization, such as the Hong Kong Federation of Students, which led the Umbrella Movement. If the members were working in other NGOs or social movement organizations, their work and goals were much clearer and more concrete.

Andy humbly confessed his inactive participation in Left 21, "I was a bad guy, I didn't prioritize my membership in Left 21. It's best if we, the front-line organizers, could have organic collaboration between the trade unions and Left 21. It was my fault that I didn't actively think of the division of labour between discourse and organization." He repeatedly felt regret for his limited presence. This indirectly illustrates how the position and goal of Left 21 was confusing and lacked direction for its members. In 2014, the biggest political opportunity of democratic movement appeared in 30 years. Andy joined the planning of Occupy Central without hesitation. Looking back after ten years, he remained confused, "As a leftist, shouldn't we be distinguished from the

pan-democrats and promote more progressive ideas that transcend representative democracy? In reality, it's like shooting a movie. We are busy following the instruction and preparing for the lighting, audio, costumes, props… But when we see the product, it's not the thing we want! Because we were never the director." The political agenda has always been dominated by the election-oriented pan-democrats. So, to members with backgrounds in other organizations, the alternative in action wasn't progressive left-wing, but the pan-democrats.

The close linkage between Left 21 and the pan-democrats further blurred the flag of Left 21. Some radical youth sought to battle with the pan-democrats on social media when they made some pro-business decisions or statements. But they could do this only to the extent that it was harmless to their election interest. The close alliance with Left 21, who were also those members with overlapping identities, mediated the relationship between Left 21 and the pan-democrats, and "promoted harmony in the sector for the big picture" (that the non-establishment groups should be united in elections). Left 21 wasn't strong enough to be officially excluded from the "non-establishment camp", not to mention to establish their left-wing propositions.

On the other hand, for the radicalized groups, the alternative was localism, not the "leftards". Since the HKTV assembly, localists mobilized their supporters to attack Left 21 from spamming on social media to personal doxxing. The attack revolved around Left 21 being the unendorsed leader of social movements, betraying Hong Kong's local interests to defend mainlanders. Radical youth members such as Adrian were not afraid of the stigmatization. "In the July 1st demonstration, we deliberately proclaimed about all the issues that localists hate, from supporting new immigrates to domestic workers. We were there to challenge the localists." However, even members who were

competent and confident in confronting the localists, they eventually couldn't attract newly radicalized youths, as localism took over as the mainstream ideology at the time.

Death: Begging to Disband (2016-2019)

This period was the hard time for Left 21. First was the trauma from the failure of the Umbrella Movement, and then the dominance of localism in competition with traditional political organizations. Within the unfavourable social atmosphere, the agenda-setting power was seized by the localists to talk about self-determination and independence for Hong Kong. Left 21 could only reactively responding to their agenda. Some individuals close to Left 21 even suggested advocating restrictions on the migration of mainland people to Hong Kong, just to alleviate attacks from the localists. "Localists wouldn't support you because of that, but you're giving up your principals." Terry was reluctant to see the rightward turn of the past alliance. And few activists any longer found discourses like anti-capitalism attractive. And then a conflict nearly caused the end of Left 21.

Conflict: Unsatisfactory Working Condition of HKCTU

During the 2016 Legislative Council Election, members suggested publishing articles to criticize political parties from a left-wing perspective. All parties running for election were commented upon to ensure fairness, including the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions and the League of Social Democrats, in which there were many overlapping members in Left 21. Articles complained about HKCTU for its unsatisfactory working conditions, in contrast to its advocacy of labour rights. After it was published, there was backfire from HKCTU members, saying that Left

21 should point a gun at the enemy instead of causing internal troubles. The initiating member, Matthew, was, in fact, not from HKCTU. He explained that his purpose was to raise the issue of the unsustainable ecology of social movements, in which front-line workers were working for long hours with low wages. The high mobility rate meant that experience and training could not be passed on to new members. He challenged another Left 21 member, who was also the management of the HKCTU, for exploiting workers from a capitalistic perspective. Some agreed with the argument, but others were unhappy with the lack of political sensitivity in the timing and method of the discussion. Things intensified and were full of personal attacks. In the end, a huge number of HKCTU members quit Left 21. Was this the result of protecting electoral interest? Perhaps. It was mentioned by a few members that the tendency of sectarianism was strong when political factions compete with each other and cared primarily about their reputation for the sake of elections.

Death Thrones

After that, Left 21's morale dropped to its lowest point. There were not many active members left in the group. Informants joining in this period were complaining about how hard it was to maintain an organization with a limited number of people. Their main focus shifted back to ideological education again, such as holding discussion sessions during the Marx Festival, and providing internship programmes. The convenor, Terry helplessly complained, "I frequently called for disbanding Left 21, but those bastards neither support disbanding nor join our work. It hasn't officially disbanded up till today." Throughout the interview, Terry was trying to distance himself from Left 21. It was the first time he showed his anger. When I asked him whether he was disappointed, he nodded with a smile.

Terry didn't give up straight away after 2016. Trying to revive the group, he reconnected with more people in civil society, but it was not effective. After the HKCTU conflict, other NGO workers would distance themselves from Left 21 as it became a symbol of trouble and internal conflict. Also, in the right-turning Hong Kong, fewer activists agreed on the anti-capitalism agenda and were concerned more with the China-Hong Kong conflicts. Failing to call on official meetings to disband, Left 21 ceased operation in 2018-2019.

7. Work-oriented Culture

Democracy in Practice and Participation

In order to exercise equality, the core value of left-wing ideology, there was no hierarchy in Left 21's structure. Without posts like chairperson, the secretariat and working group representatives were democratically elected, and their job was to do administrative work instead of making critical decisions on behalf of members. Left 21 adopted a consensus system that allowed for debate and discussion if there was dissent. In reality, democracy was indeed guaranteed in structure, and members agreed that there was no "boss" in the group to control others. However, this mode of democracy could also mean the absence of clear-cut responsibility and rights, as heterogeneous members participated in the work voluntarily without payment. As a result, in practice, the division of labour and workload could be very problematic, since the commitment of members varied to a large extent.

Most of the workload went to the part-time staff and more active members, while members with overlapping identities were busy with their paid job. The part-time staff Mathew between 2013-

2016, said that the scope of work has never been clearly defined. The staff was expected to deal with everything, from administrative work like preparing documents and budgets, to media promotion and managing online platforms, to action planning like discussion sessions and internship programmes, which obviously was an impossible and unreasonable amount of work. For Tin, joining after 2016 in the withering period of Left 21, her major job was the above work, and also to help organize the inactive members, when there were not many people left in the group. “I think my role was passive. I felt weird that my job was supposed to assist members, but in practice no one was initiating anything.”

In the HKCTU conflict, despite the discussion on the working conditions of front-line workers, Terry complained about how the dispute happened on the basis of insufficient participation of members. The article making the criticism was posted in an internal communication group for consent and discussion before public publishing. But opponents only commented after the discussion deadline. “We wanted equal decision making, but it’s impossible when members didn’t join the work. It all depended on how much time you spend on the organization.” As a result, the “iron law of oligarchy” by the more committed members within the group was unavoidable “Ultimately it’s run by the people,” Terry said.

The ever-changing social atmosphere also hindered a more thorough discussion on organizational direction, resulting in a more work-oriented environment. The media group member, Cole, talked about the urgency and intensity of writing articles. He listed a bundle of things that editors needed to take a stance on: the Joint Committee of the 5 District Referendum Movement, the establishment of labour parties, Occupy Central in 2011, the 1 July Protests. Cole was tired of catching up with

endless work. But the intention and impact of publication had never been discussed within the group. As a result, he was confused about the work. Everything was *ad hoc* without sufficient evaluation of the target audience, the format of distribution, the impact, and the position in social movements. Cole expected to have better understanding of other editors' thought, but the tight schedule wouldn't allow for deeper discussion. This unclear direction was also the major reason that caused members fading out from Left 21, just like Cole. How can an organization maintain high exposure in society without consensus on its stance and action goals, as well as insufficient active members? The democracy institutionalized by the structure ended up causing the struggles and confusion of existing members.

Power

How members perceived their feelings varied with their experience in social movements, personality and active status. As most of my informants were core members, their feedback to the relationship with others was quite positive—their responses implied that they wouldn't be core member if they had bad feeling in the group. Part of the reason for this was that many knew each other prior to being involved in Left 21. Rarely was there interpersonal conflict.

Even with conflict, they were able to keep it ideological instead of personal. In 2013, Left 21 was faced with financial difficulty. Some members proposed raising funds through selling T-shirts. Others were concerned that they should avoid sweatshop production and support fair trade, but at a high cost. Conflicts burst out on ideals and pragmatic execution. One of the youth members, Adrian, was the one who proposed the T-shirt idea. He said, "It's impossible to transcend capitalism right now. They're just fooling themselves." Similar incidents had happened before:

professors refused to do lectures with admissions fees as “knowledge shouldn’t be commodified”; experienced seniors rejected short-term funding proposals and sought to operate the group sustainably. Adrian appreciated their principles but couldn’t help worrying about the more pragmatic financial problem. “They’re not speaking the language of ordinary people. They’re just being self-centred.” At the end, all members agreed on the proposal. Although Adrian argued with scholars and seniors over how to raise funds, he did not think there was a power relation based on age and experience. There was autonomy for youths to try out different actions even in radical ways. He was also elected to the secretariat in his first year and gained more space to set plans for the group; thus he regarded this dispute as a conflict about principles rather than abuse of power by seniors.

Members who were experienced activists were also aware of power from experience and age, and so avoided lecturing or giving instruction to younger members, in order to allow more space for youths. Tin, from the gender working group, saw the intense meetings in Left 21 as a matter of power relations. “Some members wouldn’t stop talking in meetings. And the conversation was so difficult and full of theory.” In order to revive the declining group, Tin tried to reconnect members through interpersonal relationships, often inviting members for lunches and gatherings. Tin recalled that some members were very caring and tried their best to assist others and take care of the organization’s daily operation. However, “unfortunately, there were no more than 5 people who held this mentality in the organization.”

8. Conclusion: Revolution is Yet to Come

In 2019, the biggest political movement in the post-war period broke out. The Anti-extradition Law Amendment Movement mobilized millions of citizens and lasted for more than half a year. Its influence lasts until today. Left 21 had already ceased to operate at the time. Some former members established an online media journal, *the Owl* (夜貓，2019) to continue spreading left-wing discourse. In June 2019, at the beginning of the movement, they published an article called *"Left Silent: Negotiating The Distance Between You and the Movement" (左翼的失語——當運動和世界和你有所距離時應該如何自處)*. The article sparked much discussion in traditional social movement organization circles. The majority reaction was negative and angry. Some criticized the article for ignoring the subjectivity and agency of the protesters (許寶強，2020). Others discussed how it was a critical moment for an activist such as the author to forgo academic discussion and actively join political struggles when people were rising to action (無國界社運，2022). The writer was blamed for only making excuses not to participate in the movement.

This debate was huge for traditional organizations, but not to the movement as a whole. In fact, the bottom-up nature and loss of leading role of traditional political parties already determined that political organizations could no longer control public discourse, let alone the already marginalized left-wing politics. And the fact that no one ever tried to use Left 21 as a platform to mobilize and join the movement said it all: the independent flag of left-wing no longer matters. The social reality was that more left-leaning activists felt uncertain as to the existing left-wing theory in Hong Kong.

For the short history of Left 21, it was very much confined by its historical position. With economic crises repeatedly sweeping the globe, the pan-democrats had left a huge blank as to class issues, creating the possibility for the rise of the independent left. And indeed, people could create history,

and civil society did indeed head leftward. Radicalized youths began to devote themselves to more grassroots issues, and ideologically similar organizations like the League of Social Democracy, and the Confederation of Trade Unions and the Labour Party could adopt a more radical stance through Left 21's initiation in policy. But this advantage also created fragility in Left 21. When the left-leaning environment encouraged members to join the group, they missed the chance to cultivate them into more forming a more determined left wing, and missed the chance to provide a more convincing social blueprint alternative other than "anti-capitalism", especially when the political agenda turned to China-Hong Kong conflicts. The unclear goal pushed members away to other issue-specific groups, whether the pan-democrats or localists. After 2019, the map of civil society no longer included the left wing. Members chose different routes. Some migrated oversea; Some continued doing community organization work. Some felt desperate within the dim future of left-wing politics; Some denied the left-wing framework and chose localism.

What is to be done?

It would be arrogant for me, a person who never joined the group, to evaluate what to do next for the left-wing sector. But as I talked to some informants, and when I read through the articles and social media posts of Left 21, I also developed the feeling that the left-wing theory wasn't localized and empirical enough to convince the crowd. The part-time staff member Mathew said, "In Left 21, there were around 20 active people doing the work, but only 5 of them would be thinking of the development of the group. The ability and knowledge of 5 people were so limited. How can we break through that situation?" To be exact, I would name a few questions that Left 21 never answer.

What is the historical political-economic trajectory of Hong Kong, that is to ask, what is the nature of workers in Hong Kong? What is its position in the opening-up policy of China, and hence how is it related to China's apparent political control over Hong Kong? What is Hong Kong's relation to other countries as a global financial centre? In the coming Greater Bay Area planning, what function does Hong Kong perform, and how will class conflict be represented and expressed?

As for the fragmented civil society, how can activists reunify their left-leaning power, despite the previous discontentment? Given the political suppression by authorities over many forms of aactivism as seen in the National Security Law, how can activists redevelop grassroots networks and organizations? What is to be done is an extremely difficult question. It involves judgement on the current situation in its social historical context, as well as the mobilizing power we currently have. Scholars engaged in knowledge production need organizers for dissemination, while front-line organizers interacting with workers need a theoretically informed perspective for building up class power. It is idealism to imagine that capitalism will collapse on its own, or revolution will happen tomorrow. In the face of more intensifying political oppression and social control, not to mention the changing global economic crisis, what is to be done?

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