

Carrying water for freedom

Hong Kong's protestors are brave and, so far, successful. The Chinese Communist Party leadership must be kicking itself

BY JOSEPH YI-ZHENG LIAN

The four-month-old anti-China protest in Hong Kong, dubbed the Water Revolution, has been an extraordinary success. Required by circumstances to evolve at incredible speed, the pro-democracy movement has managed to maintain undiminished stamina and intensity in the face of an often-unrestrained police response and an unconciliatory government.

Few expected it to last so long and present such a potent threat to Beijing's hold on the former British territory. The surprising sustainability of the movement is attributable to two factors. The first is that this iteration of Hong Kong's pro-democracy movement is facing much less hostility—and even some tacit support from—the business sector, which has expanded its reach beyond the traditional heartlands of the pro-democracy middle classes and young people.

This wasn't the case during the 2014 Umbrella Movement, so what changed the minds of the territory's business elite? Self-interest is the best explanation.

The flashpoint for the 2019 protests was the China extradition Bill, which chief executive Carrie Lam put to the legislature this spring. This presented a direct threat to business people familiar with a European-style rule of law inside the territory and very nervous indeed about its mainland equivalent. The business sector actually rejected the Bill before any other group, in part because many of its members had a direct and none-too-happy experience from decades of running commercial operations in China. Scarred by personal experience of bribery and corruption, they feared the long arm of unscrupulous competitors in China using extradition threats to extort them, perfectly reasonable given China's highly unreliable and corrupt legal system.

The government partially succeeded in appeasing them with a long, tailor-made list of exemptions. Even then, misgivings remained because elements in China could always create other false charges. The prestigious Hong Kong General Chamber of Commerce, which represents the interests of many small- and medium-sized businesses—the bread-and-butter of Hong Kong's vibrant market economy—has steadfastly maintained its objection to the bill, and to some of the police misbehaviour since the protests began.

Surprisingly, the territory's preeminent tycoon, the richest man in Asia, Li Ka-shing, came out with a strong plea on behalf of the young protestors who had suffered police brutality and run foul of the law. He asked the government to show compassion and to go easy on "those who are the future of our society". This thoroughly rankled Beijing's communist leaders, who showed displeasure in an article published in a medium under

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the control of the Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission, one of the most powerful organs of the communist party, attacking Li for aiding and abetting Hong Kong "criminals", while also accusing him and other local real estate tycoons of having long profited from sky-high real estate prices in the city, causing a huge wealth gap and thereby creating dissatisfaction among the people. Li, who has shrunk his investment portfolio in China and off-shored most of the assets of his business empire, shot back with a defiant statement. He commands respect in much of the business sector in Hong Kong and so his attitude on the issue, and towards China in general, can reasonably be seen as representative of a wide cross section of business people. Even so, with the exception of a few other tycoons who issued statements to condemn the protestors, the rest have kept very quiet.

But there is another reason for attacking the tycoons. The current conflict is intensely political. It accentuates the antagonism of Hongkongers towards China and especially the communist party, for its totalitarian ideology, for the way it has reneged on its pre-1997 promise of allowing Hong Kong to go through democratic reforms and universal suffrage by 2007, and for the ever more suffocating control it has been exerting in Hong Kong's educational, cultural, legal, media and even religious spheres.

China does not want to bear the brunt of the people's anger and is seeking a scapegoat among the real estate tycoons. There is more than a whiff of hypocrisy to this: during the last two decades, Chinese state and state-related capital has been investing heavily, even recklessly in the eyes of some of the local tycoons, in Hong Kong property. In each and every one of the city's major land auctions, so-called Red Capital has been furiously bidding up prices and beating out the local tycoons. If there is an ever-larger wealth gap in Hong Kong, defined by the haves and have-nots in home ownership for millions of local people, it is China's hot money that is the culprit.

While none of the tycoons has been as openly defiant as Li, it is almost certain that many of them are angry. And if they are angry they can do things discreetly to get even. A possible example: recently there was a fund-raising operation organised by the protest movement to finance the purchase of advertisements in the major newspapers in the developed world, to explain Hong Kong's plight and to ask for help. The fundraising target was easily surpassed within 24 hours. It looks likely that some of these disgruntled tycoons, unable to help even indirectly the movement in Hong Kong in any other way, have opened their wallets.

It is also important to note that, unlike the Umbrella Revolution, these protestors don't occupy the main traffic arteries continuously for weeks ▶