

The Hong Kong Pro-democracy Movement: Challenges and Divisions in the Past Decade

Joseph Yu-shek **Cheng***

*Non-resident Senior Research Fellow,
Institute for Security and Development Policy, Stockholm, Sweden*

Abstract

This article is an attempt to examine the challenges to Hong Kong's pro-democracy movement and the movement's internal divisions in the past decade or so. It is based on the author's research and writing on Hong Kong's pro-democracy movement in the past decades as well as his role as a close participant/observer when he served as co-ordinator in a number of campaigns of the movement. In various activities and protests, he had numerous informal discussions and conversations with leaders of pro-democracy groups, activists and ordinary participants. This article does not argue that improved unity and performance of the pro-democracy movement might have changed the outcome; after all, Chinese leaders' assessment of the broad domestic environment and their Hong Kong policy were the more determining factors. This article has no intention to allocate responsibility and blame either.

Keywords: *pro-democracy movement, progress in democracy, provocative campaigns, younger generation of activists, internal divisions, "one country, two systems" model, electoral competition*

1. Introduction

This article is an attempt to examine the challenges to Hong Kong's pro-democracy movement and the movement's internal divisions in the past decade or so. The movement was frustrated with the lack of progress in democratisation since 1997; by the end of the 2010s, it experimented with more provocative campaigns to exert pressure on the Chinese authorities and the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) government to seek a breakthrough.

Allowing genuine progress in democracy in the territory would not only have strengthened the legitimacy of the HKSAR government, but also enhanced the appeal of the "one country, two systems" model to Taiwan, and improved the domestic and international image of the Chinese leadership as progressive reformers. However, with the rejection of this win-win scenario by the Chinese leadership who perceived the demand for democracy as a challenge endangering the Party regime, these provocative campaigns prompted Chinese leaders to tighten control over the territory, leading ultimately to confrontations and a severe crackdown.

After 1997, the radicals within the pro-democracy movement began to challenge the moderates who did not have the solutions to break the impasse. At the same time, the multiplication of political parties within the movement exacerbated inter-party electoral competition and handicapped honest exchanges within the movement. The differences gradually crystallised into a clear radical segment and a moderate segment of the movement, and open criticisms against each other emerged and intensified.

These sharpening internal differences took place when the younger generation of activists, especially those from the student groups, refused to accept the established leaders of the movement and intended to pursue

an autonomous role for them with more emphasis on the meaningful experiences of political campaigns and less emphasis on their objectives, strategies and tactics. Leadership of the movement naturally weakened, and in the second half of 2019, spontaneous political protest activities took over.

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2. Background: Dissatisfaction Emerged after 1997

In the initial years of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR), Chinese leaders demonstrated to the local and international communities that they intended to follow a strict hands-off policy towards Hong Kong. The return of the Democratic Party and its allies to the legislature through the impressive electoral victory in the May 1998 elections, however, did not change the fact that they could have very little impact on the government's policy-making processes.¹ As the Tung Chee-hwa administration enjoyed the backing of a safe majority in the legislature, it did not have to lobby for the approval of the pro-democracy groups which were treated as the opposition. The Democratic Party complained that, as the largest party in the legislature,

there had been little meaningful consultation between the party and the government.

The massive protest rally against the Article 23 legislation in which more than half a million people took to the streets on July 1, 2003 was a landmark and a surprise to all parties concerned. The Tung administration and its supporters blamed the economy for the grievances of Hong Kong people, but they were seriously concerned about the legislation's threat to civil liberties and human rights.² The pro-democracy movement linked the opposition to the Article 23 legislation to the demand for democracy, and the anger with the Tung administration also highlighted its significance. People realized that they had no part in the re-election of Tung; and while his performance was terrible, the community could not force him to step down.

Although the pro-democracy camp was able to secure impressive gains in the 2003 District Council elections, its momentum was only partly maintained in the September 2004 Legislative Council elections. The Chinese authorities' strategy regarding political reforms in the territory became quite clear after Tung's visit to Beijing in early December 2003. In the first place, through formal and informal channels, Beijing was telling Hong Kong people that the Chinese authorities had full control over the entire reform process, and that they had considerable reservations on democratisation. In this way, Beijing was trying to lower people's expectations. Further, the Chinese authorities adopted delaying tactics, avoiding the reforms as promised earlier.

Then the Chinese authorities fully mobilised the territory's united front and business leaders to articulate support for the central government's position. Not only did they have to show support for the Chinese authorities, they also had to criticise the pro-democracy camp. Funding and political support for the pro-Beijing united front were much

increased; and it then launched a propaganda campaign against leaders of the pro-democracy movement like Martin Lee and Emily Lau. The campaign was aimed at reducing Hong Kong people's support for the pro-democracy movement, and to justify Chinese leaders' worries about democratisation in Hong Kong. (Cheng, 2004a)

By the middle of the 2000s, the difficulties facing the pro-democracy movement became obvious. The macro-political environment was unfavourable, prospects for genuine democratisation were dim, it had very limited influence on the government's policy-making processes, concentration on elections could not achieve significant breakthroughs, and the hostility of Beijing and the pro-Beijing united front was escalating. The pro-democracy movement largely failed to produce the leadership, solidarity and mobilisation power to overcome the above challenges. In fact, as the political environment continued to deteriorate, its difficulties increasingly exacerbated.

While the Tung administration failed to show Hong Kong people the way ahead, the Democratic Party and other pro-democracy groups were not able to demonstrate significant initiatives in presenting Hong Kong people with well-researched policy alternatives. They failed to perform the role of an effective and constructive opposition from the perspective of policy platform. They certainly suffered from inadequate resources; and as the government and the business community ignored their policy proposals, they did not get much media attention too.³

The challenge of the "Young Turks" in the Democratic Party against its leadership in December 1998 highlighted many important issues in the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong (Choy, 1998). Before the territory's return to China, there was substantial moral and public opinion pressures to maintain unity within the pro-democracy camp. Such pressures soon evaporated after July 1997. In the frustration

in the political wilderness, differences in political orientations were exacerbated and could no longer be contained.

Initially, some of the “Young Turks” left the Democratic Party and joined more radical groups such as The Frontier, and the differences existed both at the intra-party and inter-party levels. It was natural that splittism bred more easily in political wilderness. Politicians in the pro-democracy movement believed that the Chinese authorities had no intention of allowing genuine democracy in the territory in the foreseeable future; there was therefore no chance to form a government. Unity and discipline had less and less appeal to the politicians in the pro-democracy camp. Moreover, the multi-member, single-vote geographical constituencies in the Legislative Council elections further facilitated splittism. In the largest constituency, i.e., New Territories West, which returned nine legislators at its maximum, a candidate could secure a seat with 7-8 percent of the votes. Hence moving towards a more radical position might contribute to a sharp image with a strong appeal to a sufficient minority of the electorate.

Emily Lau adopted this approach successfully, and she was followed by “Long Hair” Leung Kwok-hung. At the other end of the pro-democracy political spectrum, the Hong Kong Association for Democracy and People’s Livelihood avoided controversial political issues and concentrated on district work in Sham Shui Po. Their different political orientations made the maintenance of solidarity within the pro-democracy camp more problematic.

The pro-democracy parties also encountered difficulties in their relationship with grassroots community organisations, which emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s and which had been supporting them. The latter could certainly help to raise issues of importance to grassroots community organisations in the legislature or with the authorities concerned, thus exerting pressure on the HKSAR government to provide

solutions. However, their high profile and eagerness for publicity often resulted in failures to compromise and delays in achieving settlements. Many grassroots organisations worried that they might be taken for a ride, and they often preferred to act without the involvement of the pro-democracy parties.

It was in this context that new groups like Power for Democracy, Hong Kong Democratic Development Network, and Civil Human Rights Front emerged in early 2002. They planned to concentrate on the cause of democracy and human rights, and wanted to offer an alternative to political parties in political participation. Their emergence and development reflected the disappointment with the political parties in the pro-democracy camp and the suspicions against its politicians. At the beginning, these groups tried to bring together various types of organisations in support of democracy and human rights because of the decline in the appeal of the pro-democracy political parties. They later served as co-ordinators in various political campaigns. (Cheng, 2004a) This was not an encouraging phenomenon as the political parties had the resources and the most important role to play in the push for democracy in the territory. These umbrella groups could not provide effective leadership in the intermediate and long term.

3. Challenges to Solidarity of the Pro-democracy Movement

The massive protest rallies against Article 23 legislation in 2003 and 2004 boosted the morale of the pro-democracy movement, and the pro-democracy political parties managed to present a united platform in the District Council elections in November 2003, demanding direct election of the Chief Executive by universal suffrage by 2007 and the direct elections of all seats of the legislature by universal suffrage by 2008. There was close co-ordination among the pro-democracy political

parties for the District Council elections in 2003 and the Legislative Council elections in 2004. (Cheng, 2004b; Cheng, 2005)

It was obvious that Chinese leaders would not meet such radical demands, and there was no negotiating strategy on the part of the pro-democracy movement. In fact there were not much discussions among its leaders whether or not they should approach the Chinese authorities, what were the movement's minimum demands/baseline, and so on. It was easy and safe to articulate a bold maximalist position, and thus uphold the movement's apparent solidarity. The pro-Beijing united front maintained contacts with probably all important pro-democracy activists, and the HKSAR government officials continued their dialogues with leaders of the pro-democracy parties. It seemed that the latter made no attempts of co-ordination in handling these contacts and dialogues, and there were scant exchanges on analyses of the current political situation.

It was in this context that the Donald Tsang administration introduced its political reform plan in October 2005 for consultation.⁴ Basically it proposed to expand the membership of the Election Committee from 800 to 1200; and increase five more directly elected seats in the legislature in 2008, plus another five to be elected among all the District Councillors. The reform package did not respond to the pro-democracy camp's demand for a timetable for the introduction of universal suffrage as well as a roadmap showing how the final goal would be achieved.

The Chinese authorities and the Tsang administration worked very hard to persuade at least six legislators (out of 25) in the pro-democracy camp to defect so as to secure a two-thirds majority in the legislature to endorse the political reform proposal. They failed; the pro-democracy legislators remained united and defeated the Donald Tsang administration's reform package.

The inauguration of the Civic Party in March 2006 and the League of Social Democrats in the following October made the maintenance of solidarity within the pro-democracy movement much more difficult. Obviously electoral competition became much more intense. Before this, leaders of the pro-democracy camp knew each other quite well, and there was an implicit consensus to avoid open mutual criticisms and maintain solidarity. Civic Party had no intention of violating this consensus, but some of its leaders openly declared that it wanted to be the largest party in the pro-democracy movement; this certainly made the Democratic Party uncomfortable. Its strong middle-class orientation was probably not acceptable to some radical groups, and unsuccessfully they tried to reject the party's application to join the Civil Human Rights Front.

Class orientations and personality conflicts were probably less significant, but electoral competition became unavoidable. Both the Civic Party and the Democratic Party had to compete for the moderate, middle-class supporters of the pro-democracy movement; and the room for expansion of this group was limited because upon the return of the territory to the Motherland, a considerable segment of the population had, to some extent, accepted the substitution of stability and prosperity for democracy.

Meanwhile, another segment of the pro-democracy movement became radicalised. They were dissatisfied with their leaders' concentration on parliamentary work, and were frustrated with the lack of progress in democratisation. They were more inclined to return to the grassroots to engage in political mobilisation and campaigns to exert pressure on the HKSAR government. Some of them would even consider the pro-democracy legislators as part of the Establishment.

The pro-democracy movement gradually divided into a moderate wing and a radical wing, with the latter exerting pressure on the former

and expanding at the expense of the former. Meanwhile, the Democratic Party and the Civic Party competed against each other. Wong Yuk-man, the charismatic leader of the League of Social Democrats then, openly attacked the Civic Party as a “blue blood party” in its early years. The radical leaders fully realized that their followers would likely come from the moderate pro-democracy groups and not from the pro-Establishment camp.

In late 2009 and the first half of 2010, the Civic Party formed an alliance with the League of Social Democrats in a pseudo-referendum on democratisation. The alliance intended to join hands with the other pro-democracy parties to exert pressure on the Donald Tsang administration to promote political reforms. If the Tsang administration failed to produce a roadmap leading to full democratisation when it released its intermediate political reform plan for 2012, then the pro-democracy camp would ask one of its legislators to resign in each of the five geographical constituencies, forcing by-elections allowing the entire electorate to vote as a *de facto* referendum on the political reform plan of the pro-democracy camp which was released by the Civic Party on September 9, 2009. And if the *de facto* referendum did not work, all the pro-democracy legislators would resign by July 1, 2011 in protest.

The Donald Tsang administration refused to communicate with the Civic Party and the League of Social Democrats. The pro-Beijing camp boycotted the *de facto* referendum since the Chinese authorities were very sensitive regarding referenda in Taiwan; hence they treated referenda as a taboo in Hong Kong too. It chose to discredit the by-elections posing as a *de facto* referendum. Fortunately the university student unions offered candidates to compete so as to avoid the scenario of all the pro-democracy candidates elected unopposed.

Admittedly the electorate was not very enthusiastic, and the voter turnout rate was only 17 percent. But the participation of 570,000 voters

was nonetheless impressive; they came out to vote in support of the pro-democracy movement's political reform plan. These were its hard-core supporters.

The *de facto* referendum attempt resulted in a severe division within the pro-democracy movement. The Democratic Party and the Hong Kong Association for Democracy and People's Livelihood decided to enter into negotiations with the Central Liaison Office at the same time; the former was subsequently attacked by the radical wing of the pro-democracy movement for many years afterwards. The Chinese authorities succeeded in splitting the pro-democracy camp as one segment was ready to negotiate and the other segment refused. They also secured the support of the former to endorse the Donald Tsang administration's political reform proposal. The appeal for all pro-democracy legislators to resign naturally evaporated.

The *de facto* referendum was an important indicator that many supporters for democracy realized that concrete actions were necessary to exert pressure on Beijing and the HKSAR government to secure genuine progress for democracy. The hitherto approach would not work. It later paved the way for Benny Tai's Occupation Campaign. It was significant that the Civic Party, the League of Social Democrats and the student unions of the universities co-operated. But the split among the pro-democracy parties led to their loss of momentum and the erosion of confidence in them, especially among the young activists.

A decision of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress in December 2007 promised that the election of the Chief Executive by universal suffrage could be implemented in 2017, and the election of the entire legislature by universal suffrage could then follow. The Democratic Party and the Civic Party realized the need to respond, and they approached the author to form an umbrella group among all pro-democracy parties to promulgate the issue of democratic elections.

The platform established in March 2013, the Alliance for True Democracy (ATD), was able to include all pro-democracy legislators except Wong Yuk-man. There was deep distrust between the Democratic Party and People Power, a splinter group from the League of Social Democrats.

Despite internal quarrels and disagreements, the ATD managed to fulfil its basic objectives. It formulated a set of political reform proposals accepted by the pro-democracy camp; and in the referendum held by the Occupation Campaign in June 2014 in which 787,000 people took part, its proposals came first with over 331,000 votes. While the ATD was happy with the results of the referendum, the Democratic Party held a press conference on June 30 indicating that it would withdraw from the platform. The author secured the ATD's authorisation to invite the Democratic Party to continue its co-operation with the ATD.

The broad picture was certainly far from optimistic. The Chinese authorities formally ignored the platform, and so did the HKSAR government. They had no intention to negotiate with the pro-democracy movement, and they had no plan to promote democratisation. With the benefit of hindsight, since the façade was broken, Beijing would further tighten its policy towards Hong Kong. Although the formal decision on political reforms was to be announced by the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress on August 31, 2014, the writing had been on the wall. The Chinese leadership would nominally keep its promise of allowing Hong Kong people to elect their Chief Executive by universal suffrage, it would, however, control the nomination process so that the community could only choose from a list of candidates approved by it.

The previous consensus of the pro-democracy movement was to use the ATD as the umbrella platform to negotiate with the HKSAR government. Since there were no negotiations and the Chinese position was unacceptable, the initiative moved to the Occupation Campaign.

The Occupation Campaign attracted substantial attention and support of Hong Kong people (Cheng and Chan, 2017). It reflected that they understood Beijing's conservative position on political reforms, and were ready to engage in peaceful campaign action to articulate their demands and exert pressure on the authorities. The Occupation Campaign had an elaborate program of mass mobilisation through community-wide deliberations; this program in turn generated an accountability system. The campaign leaders were ready to maintain close dialogue with the pro-democracy political parties, but they intended the campaign to be a civil society movement separate from the political parties.

The ATD was perfectly willing to terminate its operation as agreed, but the pro-democracy parties definitely wanted a role in the Occupation Campaign. As the campaign attracted a lot of people outside its original mass deliberations network, its accountability mechanism was challenged as it could not absorb, co-ordinate and be accountable to the large number of people who spontaneously participated in the daily gatherings.

As reflected by the absence of negotiations, the pro-Beijing united front had abandoned the soft persuasion approach, i.e., it would no longer preach the gradualist road and that democracy would be implemented when the conditions were ripe. It understood that this approach had lost its credibility and persuasive power. Hence it would no longer engage in deliberations on the subject, nor in a kind of "give and take" negotiation process. The united front, however, would continue to infiltrate the pro-democracy movement and absorb those who would abandon the cause for personal gains.

This hard line coincided with the developments in Mainland China. Most China experts agreed that the Chinese leadership began to exercise increasing suppression against all types of critics and dissidents since the

Beijing Olympic Games in the summer of 2008, especially in view of the troubles in Tibet in the previous spring and the riots in Xinjiang in the following year. The underground churches, the autonomous labour groups and the human rights lawyers especially came under pressure. This suppression has been intensifying during the Xi Jinping administration.

The pro-democracy political parties probably did not have adequate mutual trust and were too busy to engage in meaningful and constructive exchanges of views on broad issues of analysis of the macro-political environment, the situation in Mainland China, Beijing's Hong Kong policy, the pro-democracy movement's intermediate- and long-term strategy, etc. The ATD simply followed its agenda to arrive at a consensus on a common set of political reform proposals and worked hard to secure public support for it. The Democratic Party and People Power especially did not intend to reveal their respective plans. The author's understanding is that such discussions seldom took place within the individual political parties themselves. Their leaders were too preoccupied with daily parliamentary work and party administration.

4. The Rise of Radical Politics and the Erosion of Leadership in the Pro-democracy Movement

The mass media observed that Benny Tai and his colleagues soon lost the initiative after the launch of the Occupation Campaign in the early morning of September 28, 2014. The Hong Kong Federation of Students and Scholarism refused to accept the leadership of Benny Tai even before the launch of the campaign, as they were impatient and more inclined to take radical action. The generational differences among leaders of the pro-democracy movement were exposed.

A tripartite co-ordination mechanism was almost immediately established including leaders of the Occupation Campaign, responsible persons of the major pro-democracy parties as well as leaders of the Hong Kong Federation of Students, Scholarism and the student unions of the tertiary institutions. The Occupation Campaign failed to maintain its initiative though it had spent great efforts in preparatory fundraising and logistics work; the student activists wanted independence of action and refused to accept the leadership of the other two groups, they were not very well co-ordinated among themselves though; and the political parties' leadership or guidance were not well accepted.

The groups met frequently, and uneasy compromises were often reached on daily routine arrangements, while no in-depth discussions were held to deal with the broader questions. Student activists usually arrived quite late for the morning meetings because they slept late and got up late; the more elderly pro-democracy leaders were unhappy with such behaviour. The young student activists in turn resented the patronising attitude of the other two groups. There were simply insufficient mutual tolerance and respect for close co-operation.

Very soon they all had to face the challenge when strategic decisions had to be made on important issues like the termination of the occupation, etc. In the gatherings in Admiralty, Causeway Bay and Mongkok, local small groups emerged and they demanded a say in the running of the occupation zones. Many of the activists who emerged in the Occupation Campaign accepted no leadership, a common slogan in the mass deliberations was "They don't represent me". This was the fundamental difficulty resulting in the Occupation Campaign dragging on for too long to sustain public sympathy and support, as no leadership existed who could command the respect and legitimacy to make strategic decisions.

The author almost went every evening to participate in the gatherings during the campaign period, often at the Admiralty and usually departing for home shortly before midnight; but did not once speak at the platform⁵. He talked to the participants informally whenever he could. The most significant impression received was that the participants, especially the young ones, valued the experience of participation; they usually did not expect that the Occupation Campaign would lead to important positive outcomes. They therefore were not much concerned about strategy and tactics, nor the issue of leadership. They had their heroes in mind, but very often not the leaders of the pro-democracy movement. With the benefit of hindsight, these attitudes probably led to the spontaneous street protests in the second half of 2019.

In the early years of the new century, the keen interest of the community in the protection of the Victoria Harbour and the preservation of some historical sites including the Star Ferry Pier in Central, Hong Kong Island had caught the government and all political parties by surprise. The local pro-democracy movement had not been effective in the policy areas of education, health insurance, youth work, community building, etc.

Globalisation had led to a widening of the gap between the rich and the poor, even young university graduates became uncertain of their middle-class status. The slowing down of economic growth, the downsizing of the civil service and most public sector organisations, the streamlining of enterprises to enhance profit rates, and so on meant that the younger generations of middle-class professionals and executives encountered more limited opportunities (Ohmae, 2006), and they probably would have to seek new sources of satisfaction. This trend might promote the further development of civil society, or might exacerbate the community's dissatisfaction and lead to protests.⁶

The body of literature on the emergence of new social movements (NSMs) in Hong Kong is still developing; there is naturally the argument that the “newness” has been exaggerated (Jordan and Maloney, 1997: 46-74; Scott, 1990). Their ideological orientation is perhaps the most important characteristic differentiating them from their predecessors; this ideological orientation is reflected by the NSMs’ objectives, organisational structures, and social patterns. Post-materialism and libertarianism are considered to have an important influence on them. (Dalton, Kuechler and Burklin, 1990)⁷

In the case of Hong Kong, radical civil groups and their activists were disappointed with the pro-democracy parties, partly because they resented electoral politics that had to accommodate considerations of pleasing voters, seeking publicity, and making compromises so as to secure partial results and avoid failures. Since the design of the Basic Law normally provides a safe majority support for the administration in the legislature, the pro-democracy parties had not been involved in the policy-making processes in a meaningful way since 1997, co-operation with them was not very helpful in securing concessions from the government. The NSMs therefore tended to contest individual issues on their own. (Lui and Chiu, 2000)

The NSMs wanted to develop loose non-hierarchical forms of organisation, and they valued the experiences of participation and the community spirit almost as much as achieving their policy objectives. Typically they developed collective decision-making processes, appealed to the community through skilful media strategies to win public opinion support, rejected the mediation of political parties and politicians, demanded direct dialogues with the government and power holders, and were willing to engage in confrontational actions. (Ng, 2013: 185-186) As observed by Ma Ngok, they sought to avoid the contamination of partisan politics and co-optation by the government in

order to maintain the purity of their causes (Ma, 2009: 50). In the middle of the first decade of the new century, the annual number of reported protests increased from under 100 before the millennium to around 200 (Ng, 2013: 181).

Such political and social conditions contributed to the surprisingly strong support for Benny Tai's proposal for the Occupy Central Campaign presented in his *Hong Kong Economic Journal* column in January 2013⁸. Tai hoped that the occupation would rally support from the public and exert pressure on Beijing to allow for democracy for the territory. Tai's proposal was based on the belief that unless Hong Kong people were willing to sacrifice and engage in political struggle, the Chinese authorities would not concede democracy to them. The campaign ignited the enthusiasm of the pro-democracy supporters, and the idea developed into a movement because the participants were convinced that democracy was not a gift bestowed from above, and that the old approach of the pro-democracy parties would not work.

The philosophical paradigm of the Occupation Campaign came from the concept of deliberative democracy advocated by James Fishkin. Tai and his team emphasised rational discussion through deliberation day exercises to find a consensus on the method of electing the Chief Executive while the civil disobedience campaign would serve as a last resort. According to Fishkin, deliberative democracy offers the entire nation the opportunities for thoughtful interaction and opinion formation that are normally restricted to small group democracy (Fishkin, 1991: 4). Deliberative democracy brings the face-to-face democracy of ordinary citizens who can participate on the same basis of political equality as that offered by the ancient Athenian Assembly (*ibid.*). This certainly was a significant attraction and a rewarding experience to those in Hong Kong who sought meaningful political participation.

The emergence of the localism groups during and after the Occupation Campaign in 2014 had been a significant development in the pro-democracy movement. Young people's general frustration with their socioeconomic conditions and their anger with the undemocratic and repressive C.Y. Leung administration had prompted them to advocate for the independence of Hong Kong. Hence, some critics called the Chief Executive C.Y. Leung "the father of Hong Kong independence". To some extent, this was a kind of youthful defiance rather than a serious independence movement. The groups involved had not developed credible political discourses, nor had they offered any action plans or timetables. Hong Kong people are fully aware that independence is not a realistic option, yet, in the September 2016 Legislative Council elections, these localism groups secured 18 percent of the popular vote in the elections with a record turnout rate (58 percent turnout rate).⁹

In 2016, almost every student union in the tertiary institutions in the territory adopted a localism position, and many young people since then declared that they were not Chinese, but Hongkongers. The change of sentiments took place very rapidly, as public opinion surveys indicated that Hong Kong people's identification with the Chinese nation reached a peak in 2008, the year of the Beijing Olympics. These student unions refused to co-operate with the Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements in China for the annual June 4 memorial activities, resulting in some inter-generational ill blood in the pro-democracy movement. (Cheng and Yuen, 2019)

During the Occupation Campaign in 2014, student activists seized the leadership and organisation of the campaign from the original initiators. Differences emerged and continued between the activists and the leaders of the pro-democracy political parties. While some of these "Umbrella groups" openly articulated support for Hong

Kong independence, others like Demosistō (the political wing which emerged from the student group Scholarism) adopted a more moderate stand, calling for an official referendum on the future of Hong Kong.

In the September 2016 Legislative Council elections, Democracy Groundwork, Land Justice League, Demosistō, Civic Passion and Youngspiration all won seats, demonstrating the appeal of their causes and the supporters of the pro-democracy movement's preference for new faces.¹⁰ In these elections, the mainstream pro-democracy parties all encountered the challenge of inter-generational leadership changes. The Democratic Party and the Civic Party, which had prepared well, achieved satisfactory results in the elections; while the Labour Party and the Hong Kong Association for Democracy and People's Livelihood, which had neglected the challenge, suffered badly.

While the espousal of the causes of Hong Kong independence and localism served to distinguish the mainstream pro-democracy parties and the newly-emerging young radical groups, their differences in style, the lack of trust between them, and accumulated frictions had made it difficult for them to co-operate closely. They seemed to enjoy the support of different constituencies — the mainstream parties received support from liberals who were often aged 40 years and above, well-educated with middle-class status; while the radical groups attracted the support of younger generations. The former upheld the principle of non-violent political campaigns, and they shared a concern for the development of China. The latter were sometimes tempted to engage in confrontations with the police, and believed that Hong Kong should maintain a separate identity as well as a certain distance from China.

5. From Low Tide to Spontaneous Street Protests Leading to Crackdown

At the end of the Occupation Campaign, the pro-democracy movement understood that it had entered a period of low tide, as it had no realisable short-term objectives and therefore it could not effectively mobilise the community (Chen and Szeto, 2015). The number of people taking part in demonstrations and protest activities had been in decline. Meanwhile, the C.Y. Leung administration adopted a tough line against the radical localism groups whose leaders had been bogged down by court cases, even the banks refused to allow these groups to open bank accounts. In early 2017, it appeared that the localism groups had lost some of their appeal, and their future became uncertain. However, the crackdown had not reduced the levels of frustration and anger among the people (especially the young), whose political identification and political participation patterns meant that the deep polarisation in society was far from being healed. This helped to explain the pro-democracy groups' relative success in the elections after 2014.

During the second half of the C.Y. Leung administration, independence advocacy became a “straw man” which was conveniently used as an excuse for political suppression. The latter in turn eroded the cherished pluralism in society, exacerbated political polarisation and enhanced mutual intolerance. All of these factors contributed to the popular statement: “This is not the Hong Kong I used to know.”

There was no dialogue between the pro-democracy camp and the HKSAR government. Obviously, given the political climate in Beijing, Xi Jinping was in no mood for such a dialogue. Without a dialogue, there was no competition between the moderate wing and the radical wing within the pro-democracy movement, and the confrontation with the HKSAR government was dominated by the radical wing.

Civil society groups in Taiwan observed that there were frequent reviews among themselves after a major movement or campaign, and they were surprised that such assessments were almost absent after the Occupation Campaign. The probable explanation was the differences among the pro-democracy groups and the lack of achievements; there was serious concern that reviews and assessments might engender open mutual criticisms and affect the preparations for the elections in 2015 and 2016. A low-key closed-door seminar was subsequently held among the pro-democracy political parties, and the public statement issued was that they should strengthen co-operation at the grassroots level. New School for Democracy, a group dedicated to the promotion of democracy in Chinese communities, launched an oral history project on the campaign; but it abandoned the idea of publication because of the court cases of the responsible persons who had been interviewed.

On June 9, 2019, 1.03 million Hong Kong people took part in a protest rally against the introduction of the Fugitive Offenders and Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters Legislation (Amendment) Bill 2019 (“Fugitive (Amendment) Bill”) by the Carrie Lam administration.¹¹ The amendment bill allowed Hong Kong people to be extradited to Mainland China for trial for crimes committed inside and outside Mainland China. Hong Kong people felt threatened and perceived this as a significant indicator regarding the erosion of the rule of law in the territory.

Immediately after the protest rally, the Carrie Lam administration refused to make serious concessions; and the Legislative Council scheduled to vote on the bill on June 20. It was this arrogance and total disregard for the protest rally that provoked about 40,000 young people attempting to surround the Legislative Council in the morning of June 12, when deliberations on the amendment bill were to begin. This action led to some violent clashes with the police in the afternoon, who

however succeeded in dispersing the bulk of the protesters later in the evening. It was a sad scene as tear gas and rubber bullets were deployed, and at least seventy-two people were injured.

Despite Carrie Lam's promise to shelve the bill on the following Saturday, two million people poured to the streets the next day. The Chief Executive delivered a public apology on June 18, indicating that the Fugitives (Amendment) Bill would likely meet a natural disappearance at the end of the present legislative session in July 2020. But she refused to resign as requested by the pro-democracy movement; and she also rejected its other demands including the formal withdrawal of the bill, the retraction of labelling the June 12 confrontation as a riot, the release those arrested, and an investigation into the related police violence. The shelving of the bill indefinitely was undeniably a victory for the protesters.

Chinese leaders since the Sino-British negotiations in the early 1980s had been most concerned about investors' interests because they realized that as an international financial center, money could leave Hong Kong very easily. But in this case, despite the articulation of reservations by the business community and the expatriate business community, the Carrie Lam administration only offered limited concessions without resolving the basic issue of lack of confidence in the Chinese judicial system guided by the Communist Party of China. Apparently Beijing and the Hong Kong government considered that the perceived political challenges from the opposition and dissidents more significant than the territory's good business environment.

Most local people believed that the Chinese authorities' tightening of their Hong Kong policy had been the root cause of the territory's problems. In the first place, Chinese leaders considered that Hong Kong was very dependent on the Chinese economy; and in view of China's economic strength and prosperity, Hong Kong's contributions to its

modernisation had been on the decline. This attitude had often been voiced by local leaders of the united front as well as by Mainland visitors to Hong Kong.

Especially since the demand for political reforms in 2013-14 resulting in the Occupation Campaign, Chinese leaders perceived Hong Kong as a crying baby all the time asking for more. Hence Hong Kong people should be taught a lesson and should learn to respect the parameters and red lines of the “one country, two systems” model as defined by Beijing. The emergence of localism and pro-independence groups provided the Chinese authorities and the HKSAR government a convenient excuse; in defence of state sovereignty, national security and in the combat of Hong Kong independence, the Carrie Lam administration felt it had a free hand.

The mainstream pro-democracy political parties probably shared the above understanding, but they did not publicly articulate their assessments of the political situation and exchanged views among them. Intra-party discussions on such assessments seemed to be few. Apparently the same applied to the radical political groups too. In the political campaigns and protests in the second half of 2019, the established pro-democracy groups offered no leadership, and the activities were basically spontaneous.

On April 18, 2020, the Hong Kong police arrested fifteen prominent pro-democracy activists in the morning for organising and participating in illegal protest rallies on August 18, October 1 and October 20, 2019. They were illegal because the police had refused to grant permission despite the fact that formal application procedures had been observed. Actually four of the activists appealed for holding the protest rallies as planned; the other eleven simply assumed prominent positions in the rallies without involvement in the co-ordination of the activities.¹²

This appeared to be the extent of the involvement and organisational activities of the recognised leaders of the pro-democracy movement, as reflected by the official prosecutions till now. There were many protest rallies organised by individual activists, and most of them were subsequently prosecuted. In these protest rallies, there was a clear understanding that they would start in the early afternoon, and the vast majority of the participants would return home at around 6 p.m. or so. Small groups of young radical protesters usually stayed behind and engaged in confrontations with the police, often involving violence. Hence it was obvious for the entire Hong Kong community that the protest rallies before evening would be peaceful and orderly.

The hitherto low tide of the pro-democracy movement was perhaps best illustrated by two successive defeats in by-elections in the Kowloon West Legislative Council constituency in 2018 to fill the two seats vacated by the legislators disqualified because of their violations of the oath-taking ceremony. The pro-democracy camp was expected to win in the single-seat constituency, simple-majority scenarios as it usually secured a 55-60 percent majority support of the electorate. The major cause of the electoral defeats was that the camp could only mobilise 60 percent of the voters who had supported pro-democracy candidates in the 2016 elections to the Legislative Council, while the pro-Establishment alliance managed to mobilise more than 80 percent of their supporters in the 2016 elections. Differences between generations and those between the radical wing and the moderate wing of the movement were negative factors too.

The protest activities in the second half of 2019, however, helped to restore unity among various pro-democracy groups. A common line was that mutual support was essential because all parties suffered under the suppression of Beijing and the Carrie Lam administration. Mainstream supporters of the pro-democracy movement who favoured non-violent

political struggle, came to accept the radical protesters' clashes with the police as well as their violence and vandalism, believing that the main provocateur was the Lam administration and its refusal to accept the pro-democracy movement's demands. After the break-in at the Legislative Council building, a slogan was displayed stating that Carrie Lam had taught the protesters that peaceful demonstrations would be useless. For their part, the radicals avoided criticisms of their moderate counterparts, perceiving them as important political allies.

Individual pro-democracy legislators often appeared in the confrontations between the young radical protesters and the police; they often tried to protect the protesters from police brutality as their presence attracted media attention. They too aroused police resentment and were sometimes arrested and prosecuted. These pro-democracy legislators won considerable goodwill of the community.

The police brutality rapidly escalated the level of violence in the clashes between the protesters and the police. The use of Molotov cocktails could not have been imagined before. The peaceful demonstrations of secondary school students in the mornings and their organisational competence were most impressive. In the final months of 2019, the protest activities became more dispersed, smaller in scale and, in some instances, more violent as police and protesters clashed.¹³ These incidents often shut down traffic. Several universities were locked down; and there was a siege of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University that was violent and led to a brutal response from the authorities.¹⁴ At the end of 2019, more than 8,000 protesters had been arrested. And from the launch of the campaign against the Fugitives (Amendment) Bill in 2019 to the end of 2020, the police had prosecuted more than 2,300 pro-democracy activists.¹⁵ It was the arrival of COVID-19 which stopped all protest activities.

Despite the usual shunning of violence by the Hong Kong community, opinion surveys in the second half of 2019 consistently showed that more than 70 percent of the respondents considered that the main responsibility for the violent confrontations fell on the Carrie Lam administration and the police, and slightly more than 40 percent of them believed that the protesters should assume major responsibility. The community's strong sympathy for the pro-democracy movement led to its landslide victory in the District Council elections in November 2019, winning 390 seats out of slightly more than 450, controlling a majority in 17 among the 18 District Councils. Most of the newly-elected were young activists emerging in the political campaigns of the past decade.¹⁶

This new batch of District Councillors did not have much time to do useful work before the crackdown. But these activists obviously much broadened the base of support for the pro-democracy movement and were able to cultivate considerable mobilisation power. The mainstream pro-democracy parties had been trying to groom candidates for the District Council elections in the past two decades and largely failed. Before the 2019 District Council elections, the pro-democracy camp could only field 250 or so candidates for more than 400 seats, thus allowing many pro-Establishment candidates to be elected unopposed. In 2019, the situation was dramatically altered.

The election results might have shocked the Chinese authorities. In the beginning of 2020, the responsible cadres of the Central Liaison Office in Hong Kong and the State Council's Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office were reshuffled. Much encouraged by the results of the District Council elections, Benny Tai and some activists began to plan and co-ordinate for the Legislative Council elections scheduled in September 2020 and the Election Committee elections in 2021, as well as the election of the new Hong Kong Chief Executive by the Election Committee the following March. Tai and his group hoped to achieve a

small miracle through exceptionally high voter turnout rates and careful co-ordination among the candidates to secure a slim majority in the Legislative Council and the Election Committee, and they intended to influence the outcome in the Chief Executive election and the election process. This significant initiative at this stage came from outside the pro-democracy political parties, in fact some of their leaders had reservations about Tai's co-ordination process, demanding the weaker candidates to withdraw before the polling day to concentrate votes for the stronger candidates as revealed by surveys in the campaign period.

This planning was derailed by the National People's Congress's May 2020 resolution to introduce the National Security Law in Hong Kong to align with China's own laws. Apparently when the moderates in the community were appealing for an independent investigation into the police violence in the autumn of 2019 as a first step in the process of reconciliation, the Party Central Committee's plenum then made the decision. It came as a surprise because it had been kept confidential and quite unanticipated. But tightening control over Hong was the logical response of the Chinese authorities and the HKSAR government to the political turmoil. As the latter refused to engage the pro-democracy movement and the protesters, rejected any attempts of reconciliation and concessions, a crackdown was the inevitable outcome.

A poll at that time showed that 64 percent of the respondents indicated that the National Security Law damaged the "one country, two systems" model; and 63.7 percent said that it would damage the territory's status as an international financial center.¹⁷ The pro-democracy movement considers this the end of the "one country, two systems" model, as this was imposed on Hong Kong people without consulting them and it totally bypassed the local legislature.

At the end of July 2020, the Carrie Lam administration announced that the Legislative Council elections would be postponed by one year to

September 2021, citing the COVID-19 epidemic as the rationale. Before the postponement, the administration had already disqualified several pro-democracy activists from participating in the elections after their registration as candidates.

Earlier on April 18, 2020, the then Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Secretary in Hong Kong, Patrick Nip Tak-kuen, released three versions of the interpretation of Article 22 of the Basic Law to justify that the Central Liaison Office in Hong Kong and the State Council's Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office had the authority to supervise the HKSAR. Then on February 22, 2021, the director of the Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office, Xia Baolong, indicated that the Chinese authorities would implement the "patriots govern Hong Kong" policy line, meaning that the governance of Hong Kong had to be grasped by "patriots".¹⁸ To achieve this purpose, Beijing would have to "perfect the electoral system concerned".

Following the decision of the National People's Congress on March 11 at its annual conference, the Carrie Lam administration and the local Legislative Council dutifully proceeded to complete the necessary legislation.¹⁹ When the final plan emerged about a month later, an expanded Legislative Council (from 70 to 90 seats) meant that the pro-democracy camp could, at best, hope to secure 20 seats. Worse still, candidates for the Legislative Council elections and the Election Committee elections would have to go through a qualifications review process in which the national security apparatus could reject candidates, with further suggestion that this process would extend to the District Council elections. So far, no concrete proposals have emerged; but the District Councils have largely become defunct because of mass disqualifications and resignations.

For Legislature Council candidates, their nominations would require two members' support from each of the five categories in the Election

Committee, and at least two of these categories (the industrial and commercial category and the Hong Kong representatives of national political institutions category) are dominated by the pro-Beijing united front. This proposal implied that the Chinese authorities and their local allies controlled the nomination process. Regarding the Election Committee for the Chief Executive, with many new restrictions introduced, the pro-democracy camp could at best secure slightly more than 200 seats out of 1,500. It subsequently refused to take part in the Election Committee elections and the Legislative Council elections in September and December 2021 respectively.

By now, it is obvious that the pro-democracy parties have very little room to survive and operate. Most of them are still struggling to survive, though many of their leaders are under detention because of the court cases involved. In contrast, major civil society organisations like the Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union, Civic Human Rights Front, the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions, etc., have chosen to disband or cease operation. The same applied to the independent Internet media; and the vast majority of Internet commentators have left Hong Kong. Almost without exception, student unions no longer exist in the local tertiary institutions.

Hong Kong's responses to these changes have been muted, reflecting despair and a strong sense of impotence. There was a realisation that when the Chinese leadership was willing to pay a heavy price in terms of damages to the territory's functioning as an international financial center and the Party regime's international image to secure complete control, there was not much Hong Kong people could do.

6. Some Reflections

Since 1997, the Chinese authorities have shown no inclination for granting the territory genuine democracy. They are ready to maintain Hong Kong as an international financial center and business services center, but the highest priority is ensuring that Hong Kong does not pose a threat to the Party regime's monopoly of power. It seemed that the current Chinese leadership considered the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement dangerous and threatening as it had a potential demonstration effect on Mainland China itself. Hence, the pro-democracy movement was perceived as an enemy and the relationship with it was one of contradictions between enemies, and it needed to be severely restrained. (Cheng, 2023) The appropriate model would be the so called "democratic parties" in China.

A pro-democracy movement in perpetual opposition without a realistic opportunity to capture government almost inevitably encounters internal challenges and divisions. The crisis of returning to Mainland China and strong leadership before 1997 served to forestall such challenges and divisions. But divisions soon emerged in the Democratic Party in late 1998, and other political parties were established. These developments were almost inevitable. Better co-ordination mechanisms among the pro-democracy political parties, enhanced communications with various civil society groups and the absorption of young talents to the leadership of the political parties were certainly necessary and were neglected.

Given the Chinese authorities' basic position of the denial of genuine democratisation, the concentration on the parliamentary and electoral processes could not satisfy the pro-democracy movement's supporters, especially the younger generations. In the end, confrontations with the Chinese authorities could not be avoided. The leaders of the mainstream pro-democracy parties were not ready

for confrontations; but their moderate supporters were not too. In the end, it was the young activists who took the initiatives in the second half of the last decade. They valued the experiences and were willing to pay the price.

The Chinese authorities paid a heavy price too. They had no difficulties in crushing the pro- democracy movement in Hong Kong, and easily secured complete control of the territory. The turmoil in the second half of 2019 in Hong Kong and the subsequent crackdown on the territory, however, had a significant demonstration effect on Taiwan. They contributed much to the major electoral victories of the Democratic Progressive Party in early 2021; and destroyed the prospects of cross-Straits peaceful negotiations. Efforts and resources spent on cultivating the goodwill of the Taiwan people were wiped out. The image of the Chinese Party regime had been much adversely affected; and the Western world has been re-assessing the nature of the regime. With more than one million Hong Kong people holding foreign passports or permanent right of abode in Western countries, it is obvious that a considerable segment of the population wants to leave the territory. In March 2021, an opinion survey by the Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute indicated that 21 percent of the respondents had plans of permanently leaving Hong Kong; other polls in the recent one or two years reflected similar trends.²⁰ The desire to depart is abetted by the United Kingdom, Taiwan and a few English-speaking democracies offering various types of schemes to help Hong Kong people emigrate.

This is likely to result in a Hong Kong pro-democracy movement in exile, keeping the territory's situation in the spotlight, reminding the world to have a realistic assessment of the nature of the Chinese Communist regime. In the United Kingdom, the U.S. and Australia, many small groups have emerged serving the new Hong Kong immigrants, attempting to fulfil the above objectives. On important days

like June 4, July 1, etc., they have organised gatherings in several cities, sometimes attracting two to three thousand people in a major city.

The issue of insisting on peaceful, non-violent campaigns has disappeared as they are operating in Western countries; inter-generational differences are hardly relevant since the majority of the activists are relatively young, especially among the responsible persons. They seem to be aware of the problems among the pro-democracy groups from Mainland China established after the Tiananmen Incident. Fundraising does not appear to be a serious challenge yet, as their modes of operation do not require much financial support. Future development may well be different.

As many Internet media commentators have left Hong Kong and continue to operate overseas, and as independent media find it difficult to survive in the territory, Internet media among overseas Hong Kong communities may have considerable attraction among the diasporas and Hong Kong people. Here funding can be a challenge depending on the scale of operation.

Pro-democracy activists are acquiring new skills in their advocacy and lobbying work. They often co-operate with the Taiwanese, Uyghurs and Tibetan diasporas. Some of them may even think of standing for elections in the countries where they reside. Unfortunately, pressures from the pro-Beijing united front also exist in the major English-speaking countries.

In the foreseeable future, pro-democracy groups outside Hong Kong are likely to be more active than those inside the territory. The most difficult challenges are to maintain the attention of the international community and sustain the enthusiasm of the diasporas. Mutual support, tolerance and better co-ordination among these groups are naturally expected.

Notes

- * Dr Joseph Yu-shek Cheng (鄭宇碩), Non-resident Senior Research Fellow of the Swedish Institute for Security and Development Policy (ISDP) and Honorary President of the New School for Democracy (華人民主書院), was formerly Chair Professor of Political Science and Coordinator of the Contemporary China Research Project, City University of Hong Kong. Before he joined the CityU in July 1992, Joseph Cheng taught at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (1977-1989) and the Open Learning Institute of Hong Kong (1989-1991). During 1991-1992, he was a full-time member of the Central Policy Unit, Government of Hong Kong. He is the founding editor of the *Hong Kong Journal of Social Sciences* and *The Journal of Comparative Asian Development*. Joseph Cheng holds a Ph.D. from the Flinders University of South Australia, B.A. (Hons.) from the Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, and B.Soc.Sc. from the University of Hong Kong. He has published widely on the political development in China and Hong Kong, Chinese foreign policy, local government in southern China and international relations in the Asia-Pacific region. In recent years he has edited *Guangdong: Challenges in development and crisis management* (2010), *Whither China's democracy? Democratization in China since the Tiananmen Incident* (2011), *A new stage of development for an emerging superpower* (2012), *The second Chief Executive of Hong Kong SAR: Evaluating the Tsang years 2005-2012* (2013) and *Evaluation of the C.Y. Leung administration* (2020), and his latest authored books are *China's Japan policy: Adjusting to new challenges* (2015), *China's foreign policy: Challenges and prospects* (2016), *Multilateral approach in China's foreign policy* (2018), *The development of Guangdong: China's economic powerhouse* (2018) and *Political development in Hong Kong* (2020). He was chairman of the Hong Kong Observers (1980-1982) and convener of Power for Democracy (2002-2004). He has been a Justice of Peace since 1992 and was the

founding president of the Asian Studies Association of Hong Kong (2005-2007). During 2006-2008, he served as the secretary-general of the Civic Party. He was involved in the launch of the New School for Democracy and served as convenor of the Alliance for True Democracy in Hong Kong. <Email: josephcheng6@gmail.com>

1. For analysis of the elections, see all major newspapers in Hong Kong on May 25, 1998. See also Ma and Choy (1999), especially pp. 26-27.
2. See: *South China Morning Post* (Hong Kong), September 25, 2002.
3. See: Cheng (2007), especially Section IV.
4. See all major newspapers in Hong Kong on October 20, 2005.
5. 大台 /datai.
6. See, for example, Cheng (2014).
7. See also Wong and Wan (2009).
8. Tai, Yiu-ting Benny (戴耀廷) (2013). 〈公民抗命的最大殺傷力武器〉 [the greatest destructive weapons of civil disobedience]. 《信報財經新聞》 (*Hong Kong Economic Journal*), 16th January 2013.
9. See all major newspapers in Hong Kong in the two days after the Legislative Council elections on September 5-6, 2016.
10. See all major newspapers in Hong Kong, September 5-6, 2016. Another group, Hong Kong Indigenous, had its political star, Edward Leung Tin-kei, disqualified and could not take part in the elections.
11. The full text of the bill is available online at: <<https://www.legco.gov.hk/yr18-19/english/bills/b201903291.pdf>>.
12. 蘋果日報 / *Apple Daily* (Hong Kong), April 19-20, 2020.
13. See, for example, *Channel News Asia*, November 19, 2019.
14. See: *Financial Times*, November 23, 2019.
15. 蘋果日報 / *Apple Daily* (Hong Kong), February 16, 2021.
16. See all major newspapers in Hong Kong in the two days after the District Council elections on November 24, 2019.
17. 明報 / *Ming Pao* (Hong Kong), June 1, 2020.

18. *South China Morning Post* (Hong Kong), February 23, 2021.
19. *South China Morning Post* (Hong Kong), March 31, 2021.
20. 美國之音 / *Voice of America*, March 29, 2021.

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