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14 Salvation and Rights in Hong Kong

Mariske Westendorp

Abstract

This chapter details narratives of individual Hong Kong Buddhists and their motivations for spiritual and/or activist engagement during the 2014 Umbrella Movement. I argue that religion as expressed by Buddhists indicates political engagement to be more about future salvation and personal considerations of how to act as 'good' Buddhists than about the relationship between religion and politics, and. From this main argument follow two observations. First, individual motivations for political engagement are engendered by personal perceptions which are not always compatible with official religious doctrines. Second, by emphasizing the links between various political struggles, events such as the Umbrella Movement take on an extra dimension, in this case reaching beyond the specific context of Hong Kong.

Keywords: Hong Kong Umbrella Movement, engaged Buddhism, civic engagement, salvation

Introduction

On Monday 22 September 2014, the Hong Kong Federation of Students (HKFS) and Scholarism organized a class boycott which was attended by students of different Hong Kong universities. The boycott was organized in response to the announcement of the National People's Congress Standing Committee (NPCSC) on 31 August, regarding the method of election of the Chief Executive (CE) of Hong Kong in 2017. Hong Kongese students were dissatisfied with the proposed method of the NPCSC, regarding it as advocating 'fake democracy' as it ensured only delegates approved by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) could stand for election. Instead, the students demanded 'universal suffrage'. The following Friday, the students, forming a group of young pro-democracy activists 'who, unlike their predecessors, had little or no experience of a Hong Kong under colonial rule' gathered near the eastern entrance of the Central Government Offices in Admiralty (Hong

Kong Island).¹ The same evening, while trying to 'reclaim' the recently privatized Civic Square by climbing over its fences, they were surrounded by policemen. Early Saturday morning, and throughout the rest of that day, police used pepper spray and other forms of violence in an attempt to clear the site. Many activists were arrested, including Joshua Wong, the 17-year old Scholarism student leader. Tensions intensified, resulting in the police using more pepper spray and tear gas. The reaction to the perceived police force 'brutality' was intense, and resulted in many Hong Kongers joining the students in protest from that Saturday onwards.² On Sunday 28 September, the Occupy Central with Love and Peace Movement (OCLP) also moved in support of the students. Together with the students they led the Umbrella Movement, named after the umbrellas used by protesters to ward off pepper spray.

The Umbrella Movement lasted 79 days, from 28 September to 15 December 2014. During the Movement, three areas of Hong Kong were occupied: Admiralty, the main occupation site; Causeway Bay, the off-shoot of Admiralty; and Mong Kok, often described as the 'lawless' occupation site, where the leaders of HKFS, Scholarism, and OCLP had no leadership and where power was in the hands of the people. It is estimated that approximately 1.2 million people took part in the protests at various times and in different forms, an astonishing number in a city of 7.2 million residents.³ Finally on 15 December, the Umbrella 'revolution' ended peacefully, albeit without concrete solutions, winners or any breakthroughs in the debate surrounding universal suffrage.

The 2014 Hong Kong Umbrella Movement was, most definitely, a historical incident, which brought particular issues in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) into sharp focus. At the basis of the Umbrella Movement was the ongoing debate surrounding the socioeconomic and political relationship between the HKSAR and the People's Republic of China (PRC) post-1997 Handover. This relationship is shaped by the 'one

1 Cheung (2015, p. 100).

2 Prior to the event, the Hong Kong police force was seen as a peaceful and stable form of modern governmentality essential to the economic prosperity of the city (Constable, 2009). The only occasion in which the Hong Kong police had exercised strong physical force was during the 2006 anti-World Trade Organization protests when Korean farmers demanding free trade clashed violently with the police. However, the violence in those protests was directed towards the Koreans, not towards Hong Kong's own people. The violence used in September 2014 signaled for the residents of the city that the police and, by extension, the Hong Kong Government had turned against the Hong Kong populace (Kuah-Pearce, 2009).

3 Hui (2015, p. 111).

country, two systems' policy (*yiguo liangzhi* 一國兩制), a policy promising the HKSAR its own judicial, economic, social, and political systems, and a continuation of its capitalist way of life for at least 50 years until 2047. Regardless of the promises made in this policy, many local Hong Kongers feel the definite threat of an increasing encroachment of mainland China on their everyday lives through migration and tourism, investments, and political measures. The threat they feel formed the basis for the emergence of different localist groups and the Umbrella Movement.

Politics and religion

Although in essence the Umbrella Movement was a political movement, mainly joined by members of Hong Kong's middle class seeking universal suffrage, other narratives were present as well, both in the occupied areas as in other places. These were for instance the narratives of religious believers. Paying attention to these narratives indirectly highlights an aspect of Hong Kong life that is often overlooked or perceived to be irrelevant; i.e. the importance of religion in the everyday lives of Hong Kong middle-class residents. The relevance of religion is often overlooked in research into Hong Kong society. In the introduction to a recent special edition of *Asian Anthropology*, Chiara Formichi and Paul O'Connor note that:

Much scholarship has examined the Singapore and Malaysia contexts as laboratories *par excellence* of the multi-religious, multi-ethnic state, and due to recent tensions, Myanmar has been gaining increased attention; yet Hong Kong has remained at the margins, being generally perceived as having a rather homogenous population, for which religion plays hardly any role.⁴

This chapter is an attempt to correct this bias. As I will argue, religion informs the daily lives and experiences of many Hong Kongers. It also shapes their aspirations, both religious and non-religious. An examination of religion in the Umbrella Movement clearly indicates the porous boundaries between religion and seemingly 'secular' politics.

In addition, this chapter adds to the debate on state and religion in China, a growing topic amongst social scientists specialized in the country. Many studies concerning the Chinese state and religion regard these two subjects

4 Formichi & O'Connor (2015, pp. 3-4).

as dichotomous categories, operating separately and often in conflict with each other.⁵ However, as I argue in this chapter, the contemporary relation between the Chinese state and religion was not the main factor determining spiritual or activist engagement during the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement. Instead, it was the ideas regarding salvation, engagement, and rights of individuals. This case study indicates that religion is just as much an individual conduct, not always situated in the public domains of politics and/or religious institutions.⁶ Instead, it concerns individual actors who transcend the debate on state and religion through their individual considerations.

I elaborate on this argument by focusing on the civic engagement of Hong Kong Buddhist individuals during the Umbrella Movement, and by analyzing their theological and political responses to the Movement. Narratives of these Buddhist individuals were collected during fieldwork research in Hong Kong in the years prior to the Umbrella Movement (from July 2012 to July 2013, and March to August 2014), and via social media during the Movement. In my opinion, the Umbrella Movement not only occupied the streets of urban Hong Kong, but likewise occupied different (social) media and the conversations I had via these media with my Hong Kong informants. A scrutiny of different media channels during the Umbrella Movement, and continued conversations with my informants via WhatsApp, Facebook, and email afforded me insights into their religious reflections on the Movement and their levels of civic engagements, either actively or spiritually. In the highly digitalized city of Hong Kong, this research method proved extremely valuable.

The narratives presented are of individual Buddhist practitioners who do not necessarily feel represented by, nor represent a particular Buddhist organization or school. However, most of them do feel primarily attracted to Theravāda Buddhism. They attend dharma teachings and meditation classes organized by international Buddhist masters, mostly Theravādin.⁷ Moreover, most of my informants describe Buddhism as being a 'modern' religion, characterized by a wish to recover the original Buddhist tradition

5 Ashiwa & Wank (2009).

6 Asad (2003).

7 In contemporary Hong Kong, as in virtually all Chinese contexts, Mahāyāna Buddhism (mainly Pure Land, but also Chan and Tiantai) is the most popular form of Buddhism practiced. Theravāda Buddhism is the least popular. Although Theravāda Buddhism is the least popular stream of Buddhism practiced in Hong Kong, it is gaining popularity among the younger generation of Hong Kong Buddhists (Yeung and Chow, 2010). It has also become the most popular form of Buddhism among the Hong Kong middle class.

as a reaction to 'the dominant problems and questions of modernity'.⁸ I elaborate further on this in the next section.

In response to the outbreak of the Umbrella Movement and the rise of localism, these Buddhist individuals referred to personal religious values and notions to explain why and how they participated in the Movement as 'good' Buddhists. What their different narratives highlight is a preoccupation with not only questions of localism and politics, but also with questions of belonging and salvation. The encroachment of the PRC on everyday life in the HKSAR has given rise to a deeply felt perception among my informants that their Hong Kong identity is under threat. However, this was not the only meaning attributed to the Movement. The ways in which the threat was interpreted and the subsequent ways in which my informants have responded to the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement are in many and important ways related to their personal religious ideas and ideals. Some went out into the streets when circumstances allowed, some joined social media discussions, and others decided to stay away entirely, choosing inaction or private meditation as forms of civic engagement. By combining the fight for civic values, e.g. democracy and universal suffrage, with religious values the line between the religious and the secular has become blurred.

In the first part of this chapter, focus is on the civic engagement of Hong Kong Buddhist organizations during the Umbrella Movement. According to Hao Zhidong et al., civic engagement is composed of two parts: social services and civic activism.⁹ Below, I focus on the civic activism of Hong Kong Buddhist organizations and leaders during the Umbrella Movement which included 'such activities as protest rallies, demonstrations, and declarations of positions on various social and political issues'.¹⁰ In the second and most prominent section of this chapter, I detail the narratives of my Buddhist informants and their individual motivations for civic engagement. In this section, I define civic engagement as 'the ways in which citizens participate in the life of a community in order to improve conditions for others or to help shape the community's future'.¹¹ I demonstrate two ways in which my informants became civically engaged with the Umbrella Movement; i.e. through spiritual engagement and/or through activist engagement. For them, the different positions of Buddhism in the PRC and the HKSAR are

8 McMahan (2008, p. 5).

9 Hao et al. (2014).

10 Ibid., p. 50.

11 Adler & Goggin (2005, p. 236).

not as important as for organizations; instead, their narratives highlight their attachment to perceived Buddhist notions of salvation.

Setting up this chapter in this two-tiered manner allows me to bring to the fore two interesting observations. First, I will indicate that individual motivations for participating in the Umbrella Movement were engendered by individual perceptions pertinent to the concept of salvation, a concept which is not always compatible with official doctrines dispensed by religious leaders (although they are in part shaped by them). Regardless of the teachings of Buddhist organizations and leaders, individuals often express their own perceptions of what should take priority within their faith and how to be a 'good' Buddhist. In many cases, Buddhist individuals choose their own trajectories. Second, by emphasizing the links between the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement and other iconic Buddhist struggles fought in other countries during different times, the Movement took on an extra dimension as a way of aspiring to societal and eventually personal salvation beyond the specific context of Hong Kong and its relation to the PRC. It was viewed as one of a host of other Buddhist movements, aspiring to the creation of just and equal societies. Knowledge of these companion uprisings made my informants reflect more actively upon salvation and enlightenment at very personal levels. As such, the Movement not only transcended the artificial boundaries between the religious and the secular, but also transcended temporality and spatiality. It became a Movement reflecting a larger temporal and spatial dimension than it might appear to have had at first sight.

Modern Hong Kong Buddhism and salvation

As Kuo (see Introduction, this volume) argues, the emerging civil society of Hong Kong is mainly constructed by Christian leaders and intellectuals. An increasing number of Hong Kong's Christians belong to an elite group that has been active in Hong Kong's political life from the early twentieth century onwards. These Christians are the ones that want to preserve the status quo in post-Handover Hong Kong, and are therefore most politically active.¹² In the next section of this chapter, I give some examples to support these arguments. During the Umbrella Movement, many Christian organizations and leaders were actively supporting the students and in some cases even fighting for universal suffrage themselves. In contrast,

12 Smith (2005 [1985]); Wang (2016).

Buddhist organizations and leaders were less present during the Movement, perhaps because they are known to 'tilt more towards Chinese patriotism'.¹³ For this reason, studying the motivations for civic engagement of Buddhist individuals more prominently highlights the relationship between religion, politics, and belonging on personal levels.

As indicated, what characterizes most of the Buddhists I interviewed is a personal attraction to a 'modern Buddhism'. In this modern form of Buddhism various aspects of the religion are demythologized, psychologized, and rationalized, making it better adjusted to a 'modern' lifestyle.¹⁴ Other characteristics of modern Buddhism are: being more socially engaged, less ritualistic and hierarchical, and more focused on the individual instead of the deified Buddha. These features are reflected in the increasing importance attached to the role of the laity in modern Buddhist practices.¹⁵ Personal experience has become central. The aspiration to reach enlightenment is no longer merely associated with monastic vocation, but can equally be aspired to by the laity. There is also a heavy emphasis placed on the practice of meditation by the laity, which was originally only a practice of the clergy.¹⁶ Commenting on 'Reformist Buddhism' in contemporary Singapore, Kuah-Pearce Khun Eng concludes that members of a new generation of local Chinese Buddhists in the city

are not only interested in the functional aspects of religion, but rather are intent on seeking solutions to their individualized religious needs and personalized spiritual fulfilment. As with other modern religious trends, they see their religious needs as *personal*, no longer tied to religious needs of their families or community.¹⁷

As a result of these modern trends, the distance between clerical and lay Buddhists has become less; egalitarianism between the two has increased. It should therefore come as no surprise that many of my informants picture Buddhism as an individually practiced religion, highlighting their individual commitment to it, and their own responsibility to act as 'good' Buddhists. These notions feature in the narratives of most of my informants, also with

13 Kuo, this volume, pp. 13-51.

14 Lopez Jr. (2002); McMahan (2008).

15 Gombrich (1988/2006).

16 Mak (2012); Swearer (1995/2010).

17 Kuah-Pearce (2003/2009, p. 6), my emphasis.

regards to their individual motivations for civic engagement during the Umbrella Movement.

The main focus in this chapter is on my Buddhist informants' personal notions regarding salvation. Ideas of salvation (and damnation) feature prominently in most religions, including Buddhism. Salvation forms a central doctrine of this religion, stated in authoritative documents, describing ideas of a Nirvāṇa that can be accessed through the eradication of suffering. Rachel McCleary considers the effects of religious participation and beliefs on economic growth. She argues that

[s]alvation is a spiritual goal that may or may not be attained through human effort. If people believe in the possibility of salvation through their own efforts, it makes sense that they are likely to perform the actions that contribute to attaining such an end. Therefore, religious beliefs have implications for behavior, such as work effort, saving, and charity.¹⁸

This quote highlights the links between personal action and the aspiration to reach salvation. This link is also clearly visible in the narratives of my informants. However, contrary to McCleary (who has explored economic behavior) I look at the civically engaged behavior performed by my informants in response to the political Umbrella Movement.

Ideas centered on salvation feature prominently in the religious narratives of my informants: through living a spiritual life and sanctifying one's actions in the here and now (thus living as 'good' Buddhists), my informants aspire to attain salvation in the (near) future. As I will argue, their ideas are not necessarily the same as defined by religious doctrines, institutions, and leaders. Therefore, instead of focusing on the practices that my Buddhist informants *should* be performing and the beliefs they *should* observe according to doctrines or theologies, my focus in this chapter is on the practices they actually perform and, primarily, the beliefs and notions they actually hold.¹⁹ These beliefs and notions do not necessarily follow the particular doctrine prescribed by Buddhist leaders or texts, but are historically and culturally contextualized. Because all religion is lived, it is fluid and creative; and, by extension, it is adjustable to particular socioeconomic, political, and personal circumstances.²⁰

18 McCleary (2007, p. 51).

19 McGuire (2008); Orsi (2005).

20 Swearer (1995/2010).

Buddhist presence in the Umbrella Movement

In early November 2014, Winston, a Buddhist in his early 30s, sent me a message via WhatsApp.²¹ I had been in contact with Winston throughout the whole period during which the Umbrella Movement took place, reflecting on the daily happenings in the streets (he never joined them, but he read many articles online and heard stories from friends) and debating which steps should be taken next. Winston sent me the following message:

See the mess that Occupy has made. They're stuffed, they have no bargaining power left and they are fighting among themselves. It's because they had no spiritual guidance. Social activists fall into this trap of thinking that their cause is the highest one. They get burned out and bitter. Religious guidance helps them to see the longer term, and the bigger picture.²²

I found Winston's message remarkable, given that although he is Buddhist, he had never before mentioned the significance of religion for and in the protests. His words further intrigued me, as they alluded to the visible absence of Buddhist spiritual guidance in the streets. In Hong Kong, Buddhist masters are overall not directly involved with political activities, nor do they directly adhere to specific Buddhist political theologies. In fact, Buddhist presence from all Buddhist schools was mostly absent during the Umbrella Movement.

During the initial weeks of the Umbrella Movement, media were quick to emphasize the religious aspects of the protests, both the religious symbols present 'on the ground' and those that were absent from the occupied sites. English-language media sources of Hong Kong news providers and international sources mainly placed emphasis on the presence of (Protestant) Christian groups and leaders, and on the support churches provided to the protestors. Mention was made of how some churches opened their doors to protesters and police alike, offering first aid, snacks, and water, refuge, or simply a place for people to go to the bathroom. Other sources indicated the presence of prayer groups, crosses, and people reading their Bibles in the occupied areas.²³ Particular attention was paid to Christian leaders, both

21 To ensure anonymity, I use pseudonyms throughout this chapter.

22 Personal communication via WhatsApp, Winston, 8 November 2014.

23 Sources: (1) Sarah Eekhoff Zylstra (13 October 2014). Hong Kong Christians Lead Protests for Democracy. *Christianity Online*. See <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2014/>

clerical leaders of Christian groups and lay Christian leaders of different protest groups. For example, sources mentioned that the Occupy Central with Love and Peace Movement was led by, amongst others, Benny Tai, a committed Christian, and Reverend Chu Yiuming of the Chai Wan Baptist Church. And the student organization Scholarism is led by Joshua Wong, an evangelical Christian who had attended a Protestant private school and the United Christian College.

Emphasis was also placed on the position adopted by some Christian clergy members; for example, on the outspoken Catholic Cardinal Zen, who had supported the fight for democracy from its earliest moments (but later changed his position slightly). The media also singled out Anglican Archbishop Paul Kwong, who was heavily criticized following a sermon he delivered in early July 2014, in which he urged Anglicans to remain silent, just as Jesus remained silent when awaiting his crucifixion, 'like a lamb awaiting slaughter in silence'.²⁴ The spotlight likewise fell on certain Protestant ministers, e.g. the Reverend Tin Yau Yuen of the Methodist Church who, in an open letter which he wrote in October 2014, seemed to suggest that the Christian faith supports the fight for democracy. He stated: 'The gospel we believe in is necessarily related to social and political issues. It's impossible to be politically neutral, as who can have no political view?'²⁵

Only few English media sources noted the responses of Buddhist organizations and leaders in the protests. Reference was made to Buddhist symbols seen in the streets, the building of makeshift Buddhist shrines at the protest

october-web-only/hong-kong-christians-lead-protests-for-democracy-china.html. (2) Jack Jenkins (12 October 2014). Why Christians are Helping Lead Hong Kong's Pro-Democracy Movement. *Think Progress*. See <http://thinkprogress.org/world/2014/10/12/3579154/why-christians-are-helping-lead-hong-kongs-pro-democracy-movement/>. (3) Ned Levin (3 October 2014). Hong Kong Democracy Protests Carry a Christian Mission for Some. *Wall Street Journal*. See <http://www.wsj.com/articles/hong-kong-democracy-protests-carry-a-christian-mission-for-some-1412255663>.
²⁴ The official explanation provided by the Reverend Peter Koon (Provincial Secretary General of the Hong Kong Anglican Church) was that Kwong was merely 'trying to remind fellow Christians of the church's role as a "facilitator of peace"'. Sources: (1) Oiwan Lam (12 July 2014). Hong Kong's Anglican Archbishop Says Pro-Democracy Protesters Should be Like Jesus and Keep Quiet. *Global Voices Online*. See <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2014/07/12/hong-kongs-archbishop-tells-democracy-protesters-to-keep-quiet/>. (2) Ernest Kao (9 July 2014). Archbishop's Sermon on Occupy Central was 'Taken Out of Context'. Church says Controversial Remarks on Occupy were Meant as Humor, Not a Public Statement. *South China Morning Post*. See www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/article/1550314/church-defends-reverend-paul-kwong-who-told-pro-democracy-residents.

²⁵ Source: Reverend Tin Yau Yuen (10 June 2014). Pastoral Letter From the President, Reverend Tin Yau Yuen to the Methodist Congregations of Hong Kong: A Church at Crossroads. *Methodist Congregations of Hong Kong*. See http://www.methodist.org.hk/media/filehotlink/2014/10/06/Pastoral_Letter_to_MCHK_congregationsEng.pdf.

sites, and the gathering of Buddhists in occupied areas.²⁶ Buddhist monks volunteered as first-aid workers, or wrote articles to express their concern about the protests. Nevertheless, as these media articles showed, these Buddhist efforts were minimal compared to the Christian presence. It could be argued that the relative absence of commentaries on Buddhist symbols during the Movement might be an artifact of the English languages sources writing about the protests. However, my Buddhist informants told me the same: there was almost no Buddhist presence in the streets. Moreover, in early October 2014, the Hong Kong Buddhist Association released an official statement which advocated 'that Buddhists and students at Buddhist schools should avoid the protest locations and nearby areas (and likewise exhort their friends and children to do so)'.²⁷

Multiple reasons may be given for the apparent difference in the level of civic activism between Hong Kong Buddhist and Christian organizations during the Umbrella Movement. A first explanation is based upon the historical legacy of both religions. Buddhism and Christianity have different foundations in Hong Kong society. Both developed differently in relation to the political and social situation on the Chinese mainland, and in relation to the British colonial government. For example, feeling threatened by the rise of communism in mainland China, the British colonial government sought ways to promote Christian education in Hong Kong. This education was thought to raise people that could resist communism.²⁸ Therefore, Christianity was favored by the British as an ally in the fight against Chinese communism – more so than non-Christian or 'Chinese' religions, e.g. Buddhism.²⁹ As a result, Christian organizations (mainly Catholic and Anglican) were encouraged to provide education and other social services. They had the opportunity to become important, elite institutions in Hong Kong, a position they still hold in the city today. This legacy is amongst others visible in the contemporary social service sector of Hong Kong. In the school year 2008–2009, 23 of Hong Kong's 458 secondary schools were

26 Source: Jennifer Ngo (27 October 2014). Religion on the Front Line Puts Faith into Practice: Christians, in Pursuing Equality and Justice, Have Long Been Part of the City's Fight For Freedom. *South China Morning Post*. See <http://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/article/1625126/religion-occupy-central-front-line-puts-faith-practice?page=all>.

27 Source: Buddhistdoor (24 October 2014). Unattached Involvement: Expressing Socially Engaged Buddhism. *Buddhistdoor Global*. See <http://www.buddhistdoor.net/features/buddhistdoor-view-unattached-involvement>.

28 Esler (2015).

29 Leung & Chan (2003).

Buddhist, approximately 5 % of all the schools in Hong Kong.³⁰ While this may seem significant, it pales in comparison to the services (mainly educational) provided by the Hong Kong Catholic Church and Catholic missionary organizations. At the end of the twentieth century, 35 % of all social services in Hong Kong were still provided by Catholic organizations. As of 2014, the Catholic Church ran 264 schools with over 165,000 students, six hospitals, and thirteen clinics.³¹

A second reason for the difference in the presence of Buddhist and Christian symbols and leadership during the Umbrella Movement is the position that both religions hold in the contemporary PRC. As several of my informants stressed, ideas regarding the freedom of religion are critical here. For example, a professor I met at Hong Kong University – after I told him that I was interested in learning more about Buddhist and Christian engagement in Hong Kong’s political life – said that in the ‘one country, two systems’ policy, Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism emphasize the ‘one country’ part, whereas Christianity in Hong Kong mainly emphasizes ‘two systems’.³² Similar assumptions were made by media sources, some of whom suggested that Buddhist organizations appear to be relatively satisfied with the status quo of Buddhism in the PRC and with recent attempts by the CCP to promote ‘Chinese religions’ such as Buddhism and Daoism.³³ Most media sources argued that for these reasons, Hong Kong Buddhist organizations kept a low profile during the 2014 Umbrella Movement. In the same light, some media sources suggested that for Christian groups, the protests were not merely about attaining universal suffrage; they were more a way of expressing anxiety vis-à-vis Communist infiltration in Hong Kong’s society, and the likely decrease in religious freedom in the city. One news report for instance observed that ‘the protests now roiling in Hong Kong are about democracy. But there is an undercurrent of another, much older tension: between Christianity and Communist China’ (see also the chapter of Tsai on the tensions between Christianity and the state in the PRC, this volume).³⁴

30 Yeung & Chow (2010, p. 6).

31 Catholic Truth Society (2013, p. 667).

32 Personal communication, professor, HKU, 7 September 2012.

33 Source: Shai Oster (25 October 2014). How Smashed Jesus Shrine Reveals Christian Undercurrent to Hong Kong Protests. *Bloomberg*. See <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/print/2014-10-28/christians-lead-h-k-protests-in-test-of-china-s-control.html>.

34 Source: Ned Levin (3 October 2014). Hong Kong Democracy Protests Carry a Christian Mission for Some. *Wall Street Journal*. See <http://www.wsj.com/articles/hong-kong-democracy-protests-carry-a-christian-mission-for-some-1412255663>.

If one looks beyond politics in the PRC and in the HKSAR one can discern different reasons underpinning the absence of Buddhism in the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement. One reason has its genesis in the ways religion is organized in Hong Kong. In Hong Kong today, official Buddhist leadership is exercised by the Hong Kong Buddhist Association. Founded in 1945, the Association is

an umbrella body based on individual, voluntary membership rather than temple or sect affiliation. Its members tend to be of the Mahayana, or Daai Sing, northern tradition, and include Taiwanese and Japanese sects whose members have Hong Kong resident status, but have less affinity with Tibetan and Nepali traditions. HKBA, in addition to representing Buddhists locally, enjoys membership in the World Fellowship of Buddhists.³⁵

Even though on paper the Hong Kong Buddhist Association is the overarching Buddhist organization in Hong Kong, only a small minority of Hong Kong Buddhist organizations are affiliated to it. Moreover, the fact that this Buddhist Association has no political organ makes it hard for it to express a strong activist voice.

In contrast, an important and strong organization within the Hong Kong Catholic Diocese is the Justice and Peace Commission. This Commission was established in 1977 to increase the Church's participation in social actions and to promote civic participation among Hong Kong's lay Catholics.³⁶ In early October 2014, the Justice and Peace Commission issued an official statement on behalf of the Hong Kong Catholic Diocese, calling for dialogue and reconciliation between different parties involved in the Umbrella Movement. Public prayer meetings were organized during the Movement by the Commission, some for the purpose of promoting democracy, others to promote dialogue and peace.

Another factor determining Hong Kong Buddhist organizations' presence or absence during the Umbrella Movement relates to local religious leadership. As I wrote earlier, the Hong Kong Buddhist Association issued a statement in early October 2014 urging Buddhists not to become involved in the protests. Consequently, no Buddhist clergy of the Hong Kong Buddhist Association was seen in the streets. However, even though officially the Hong Kong Buddhist Association was not so much involved with the protests, at local levels, nor in individuals' appreciation of the visibility

35 Nedilsky (2009, pp. 217-218).

36 Leung & Chan (2003); Li, Cheung & Chan (1998); Nedilsky (2014).

of their religious leaders, the picture was slightly different. Leaders of local Buddhist organizations made personal decisions whether to join the protests or not. One example is the newly appointed abbot of a temple in Tsuen Wan, who maintained that 'a monk should be involved with social work, not political'. He did, however, explain the difficulty underpinning this decision: 'When I talk about politics, they say I'm a political monk. If I don't, they think I don't care about social issues. That's a dilemma'. His personal solution is to focus on and teach the dharma, rather than touching on issues of political concern.³⁷ However, some Buddhist monks in Hong Kong chose to do otherwise. Francis, a Theravāda lay Buddhist in his mid-40s, made mention of a Buddhist monk who actively commented on the protests on Facebook, based on his observations and experiences in the streets. While Francis appreciated the monk's engagement, his friends scorned the monk for being too attached and for not seeing clearly the impermanence of the situation.³⁸

Regardless of the teachings of the Buddhist organizations and leaders mentioned above, my informants' perceptions of what should take priority within their faith, and how to be a 'good' Buddhist are mostly based on personal considerations. Individual believers do not always follow the actions of faith leaders. In many cases, they choose their own trajectories. In the rest of this chapter, I focus on this by presenting and analyzing some narratives of my informants. Even though I present only a handful of these narratives, they are representative of far more Buddhist individuals I spoke to. By focusing on their ideas regarding salvation, I will show that it was not only the reasons stated above (the ways in which Buddhism is organized in Hong Kong and the position it holds with regard to politics in the HKSAR and the PRC) that were of relevance to my informants' motivations for civic engagement: their decisions were also made on the basis of personal considerations.

Individual motivations for civic engagement

Nearly a month after the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement started, the editors of the Internet organization Buddhistdoor commented on the following:

37 Personal communication, Venerable A., Wang Fat Ching She, Tsuen Wan, 19 May 2014.

38 Personal communication via WhatsApp, Francis, 6 October 2014.

In Hong Kong, the question is whether Buddhists could have had more of a presence in the streets – not to support a particular side, but to bridge the physical and ideological divide between opposing parties. (...) Maybe Buddhist temples and charities could have set up tents and booths where protesters and police alike could enjoy refreshments for free. When the scuffles and brawls broke out, perhaps Buddhists could have been present to physically protect belligerents from one another, without worrying how others might react to their mediation. Another powerful statement might have been to hold a meditation ‘flash mob’.³⁹

In their article, the editors attempted to discuss how Hong Kong Buddhists might respond to the protests in a Buddhist manner, especially considering – as indicated above – the absence of visible Buddhist leadership in the streets. They posed the following question: ‘Can Buddhists be socially engaged while remaining ideologically and emotionally unattached?’⁴⁰

For my Buddhist informants, their individual decision to join the protests or not was less colored by the example set by Buddhist organizations and leaders, probably because the latter were distinguished by their absence. For example, Adam, a Buddhist in his early 40s, said, after I asked him in the final weeks of the Umbrella Movement if he thought that Buddhist leaders in Hong Kong could have done more, that they should have promoted: ‘COMPASSION! COMPASSION! COMPASSION!’⁴¹

The individual reflections on the Umbrella Movement resulted in different manners of civic engagement. Teresa, a Buddhist in her late 30s, opted not to join the Umbrella Movement. Her reasoning was that when it comes to fulfilling one’s aspirations, personal effort will be more effective than economic or political involvement. She wrote: ‘Buddhist teaching is about how to be mindful and achieve physical, psychological and mental peace by evaluating our thinking process’.⁴² Eventually, becoming mindful will lead to a change in the environment. In effect, Teresa was saying that ‘when one’s mind becomes purified, society will also be purified’.⁴³

In contrast to Teresa, Francis, the Buddhist in his mid-40s, engaged more actively in the Umbrella Movement, being guided by spiritual engagement.

39 Source: Buddhistdoor (24 October 2014). Unattached Involvement: Expressing Socially Engaged Buddhism. *Buddhistdoor Global*. See <http://www.buddhistdoor.net/features/buddhistdoor-view-unattached-involvement>.

40 Ibid.

41 Personal communication via email, Adam, 22 November 2014.

42 Personal communication via email, Teresa, 22 November 2014.

43 Cho (2000, p. 77).

In early October 2014, Francis actively began using his Facebook account again after nearly two years of relative silence. He started by changing his profile picture into the picture of a yellow ribbon. When I questioned him about his reappearance on the social media platform, he replied:

I try only to share articles which are written by people who hold mild opinions or express their feelings, but not any 'reports' or 'facts', as you can't be sure what is true or false. (...) As a Buddhist, we are told to be aware of how we use our words: we should try not to spread any information we are not sure about in order to avoid others being influenced by our words. (...) We can voice our own opinion, but should not be spreading uncertain information.⁴⁴

By using Facebook as a medium, Francis expressed his engagement with the protests in a manner he saw justified by Buddhist doctrines. His engagement could lead to the elimination of societal obstacles (often called 'defilements') derived from the three poisons of desire, hatred and ignorance.⁴⁵ Although Francis did not directly attempt to eliminate desire, hatred or ignorance, he steadfastly avoided spreading information that might feed these root causes. By doing this, he related spirituality to activist engagement. He also indirectly related his engagement to the ideals of 'engaged Buddhism'.

'Engaged Buddhism' is an academic category that alludes to the teachings of particular Buddhist teachers in Asian and non-Asian countries, of all different Buddhist schools. Through advocating particular teachings and practices, engaged Buddhist leaders seek to achieve 'a stable order and a just society, seen as *necessary* or *prior conditions* for the discovery of genuine freedom (or awakening) by each person'.⁴⁶ According to this definition, a just society is seen as a prerequisite for reaching salvation. This can be achieved through offering social services and/or being politically active. Even though the movement of engaged Buddhism is not as well-developed in Hong Kong as in other Asian countries, its ideologies have played a significant part in the ways in which my informants responded to the Umbrella Movement, either actively or spiritually.

In many countries in Asia today, Buddhist organizations and leaders adhere to the values of engaged Buddhism. Even though 'socially and politically engaged Buddhism continues to grow and diversify in Asia and

44 Personal communication via WhatsApp, Francis, 6 October 2014.

45 Cho (2000).

46 Queen (2003, p. 20), original emphasis.

the West, [and] continues to challenge conventional assumptions about the nature and direction of Buddhism',⁴⁷ it is at the same time 'too diverse to be considered a single movement, and still too new to have developed a theoretical framework for Buddhism's engagement with contemporary issues'.⁴⁸ The teachings of engaged Buddhist masters are often a 'response to a grave crisis facing the country, such as war, invasion, deep poverty, ecological crisis, or human rights abuse'.⁴⁹ By responding to such crises in an engaged and nonviolent manner, particular Buddhist masters highlight the relevance of Buddhist teachings for the modern world.⁵⁰ Included among renowned Buddhist leaders who adhere to these engaged Buddhist values are the Vietnamese master Thich Nhat Hanh, His Holiness the Dalai Lama of Tibet, Cambodian monk Maha Ghosananda, Dr. Ahangamage Tudor Ariyaratne in Sri Lanka and Taiwanese nun Cheng-yen, the foundress of the charitable Tzu Chi Foundation.⁵¹ Among lay practitioners are the Thai activist Sulak Sivaraksa, and Burmese politician Aung San Suu Kyi, a noted Buddhist lay person who is often seen acting out the ideals of engaged Buddhism.⁵²

Being an academic category, 'engaged Buddhism' entails many different aspects, and is somewhat controversial. For example, some scholars and Buddhist leaders consider social services and political activism to be traditional components of the Buddhist religion, while others argue that Buddhist spirituality is separate from civic activism.⁵³ Another issue regards salvation, and the question of whether suffering is the consequence of individual tendencies to cling to the self which can only be eradicated through personal liberation,⁵⁴ or whether it can in part be collective and caused by the state and other social institutes.⁵⁵ A last point of discussion regards the actual practices that need to be undertaken to eliminate, or at least reduce, individual and/or collective suffering. For Buddhist monk Maha Ghosananda, one way of becoming spiritually engaged in the conflict in Cambodia was to organize meditative 'peace walks'. Ghosananda recognized 'the need for inner peace to create social peace and [suggested] the use

47 Queen (2003, p. 1).

48 Cho (2000, p. 78).

49 King (2012, p. 196); see also Truong (1998/2000).

50 King (2005).

51 Bond (2003); Huang (2003); Park (2010); Weiner (2003).

52 Henry (2006); Kittel (2011).

53 For a good discussion on this debate, see Queen (2003); Yarnall (2003).

54 Deitrick (2003).

55 Cho (2000); Hershock (1999).

of Buddhist meditation to reach this goal'.⁵⁶ For him, mental purification forms the basis for reaching salvation. On the other hand, in response to the 2011 Occupy Wall Street Movement, American Zen teacher Lewis Richmond offered his reflections on the question of how Buddhists should respond to the protests.⁵⁷ While some of his Buddhist friends instructed occupiers to emphasize non-violence, compassion, and meditation, Lewis expressed a more active approach. He argued for a true awakening, one similar to the awakening that Prince Gautama experienced when he left his palace and was confronted with the 'four sightings' (the old, the poor, the sick, and the dying). His awakening was not based on meditation ('Gautama, after all, was not schooled in meditation when he experienced the four sightings') but on anger. Thus, emphasis on anger, and consequent civic activist engagement, might lead people to gain positive merit, as 'performing morally good deeds with the right intention earns the individual *karmic* merit necessary for movement toward *nirvana*'.⁵⁸

Consciously or unconsciously, my Hong Kong Buddhist informants relate in important ways to these discussions concerning engaged Buddhism. Most of them express a wish to reduce suffering (both individual suffering and the suffering in society), attain happiness in the 'here and now' (reflected in Thich Nhat Hahn's famous quote: 'happiness is here and now') and eventually reach enlightenment. Salvation is an aspiration that needs to be reached individually. However, opinions differ as to how this should be done: through focusing on individual salvation or by attempting to reduce suffering in society.

This was most prominent in the narrative of Adam, the Theravāda Buddhist in his early 40s. Adam is one of my few Buddhist informants who actively went to the occupied areas to show his support. In an interview in 2012, he said: 'I hope the philosophy of Buddhism can be applied in Hong Kong. The world would be a lot lovelier'.⁵⁹ With this statement, he clearly expressed his wish for being engaged, not only with himself but with society. Adam grew up without a religious belief. He went to school and university, and got himself a good job at a local airline company. For many years, he was 'rushing and running' to earn enough money to be able to have a luxurious lifestyle, to own an apartment, to drive around in his own car,

⁵⁶ Weiner (2003, p. 116).

⁵⁷ Source: Lewis Richmond (16 November 2011). Occupy Buddha: Reflections on Occupy Wall Street. *Huffington Post*. See http://www.huffingtonpost.com/lewis-richmond/occupy-Buddha_b_1114139.html.

⁵⁸ McCleary (2007, p. 55), original emphasis.

⁵⁹ Interview, Adam, Thai restaurant, Tai Mei Tuk, 19 January 2012.

and to wear fashionable clothes. Then, through an alumni event at his previous university, he came into contact with Buddhism. This changed his outlook on life. He no longer only focused on securing a luxurious material lifestyle for himself, but became concerned with the welfare of others. He quit his job and went to Malawi, to work in a Buddhist orphanage. Upon returning to Hong Kong, he started working in a newly constructed Buddhist monastery in the New Territories. In his own words, Buddhism showed him happiness, and it is this happiness that he hopes every Hong Kong resident can experience.

Nevertheless, in June 2014, before the Umbrella Movement had actually started, when I pressed him further on the actual engagement he desired from Buddhist leaders, he rhetorically asked:

What did the Buddha do 2,600 years ago, when his kingdom was overtaken by other rulers? He didn't say they should fight; he didn't do anything. And what about Thich Nhat Hanh and the Dalai Lama? They don't fight. When Thich Nhat Hanh was expelled from his country, he didn't fight his way back in.⁶⁰

Perhaps paradoxically, Adam did join the occupation. For him, it is important to always try to find the middle path. Both physically fighting and not engaging are reflections of choosing sides. For Adam, choosing the middle path, that is, not becoming attached to an opinion or side in the debate, is an important condition of his aspiration to salvation. In his response to my questions, he mentioned other Buddhist leaders – the Buddha himself, Thich Nhat Hanh, and the Dalai Lama – who, in his eyes, expressed similar ways of engagement.

Similar to Adam, Emily, a Buddhist in her mid-30s, explicitly placed her response to the Umbrella Movement in the broader context of Buddhist teachings vis-à-vis struggles over social justice, in effect implicitly relating the Umbrella Movement to the ideals of engaged Buddhism. Initially, Emily supported the Movement, especially in the first days, right after the police violence had taken place. On Sunday 28 September, she tried to go out into the streets at night, but could not get further than Admiralty station. During the weeks that followed, her attitude changed as a result of the increasing violence occurring in the streets. In mid-October, she indicated via WhatsApp that she wanted to take a break from the restless environment and protests. She said: 'We need to learn how to manifest

60 Personal communication, Adam, small Buddhist temple, Lantau Island, 28 June 2014.

democracy in a peaceful way'. I asked her if staying away from the protests was not an act too passive in the struggle for universal suffrage. 'Not really', she answered, 'Buddhist noble silence is the most powerful [method]. Think about Thich Nhat Hanh and his sangha: how did they react to the Vietnamese Government?'⁶¹ Similar to Adam, by emphasizing the links between the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement and other iconic struggles fought in other countries during different times, the Movement took on an extra dimension for Emily as a way of aspiring to societal and eventually personal salvation that reaches beyond the specific context of Hong Kong.

Emily and Adam mentioned the struggles fought by the Dalai Lama and by Thich Nhat Hanh. While the Dalai Lama has never visited Hong Kong due to political reasons, Thich Nhat Hanh travels to the region once every few years, attracting crowds of almost 10,000 people for his public speeches. In conversations with other informants, other Buddhist leaders were mentioned as well. Some referenced the progressive Australian Theravāda monk Ajam Brahn, who advocates nuns' rights in the sangha, or the Sri Lankan monk Ariyaratne's emphasis on non-violence. Being closely situated to Taiwan, most of my Buddhist informants spoke highly of the Buddhist nun Cheng Yen, foundress of the charitable organization Tzu Chi, and some of them looked to the civic engagement of this movement during the 2014 Sunflower Movement in Taiwan for guidance. By relating to these and other Buddhist leaders and movements, my informants signified their personal engagement as part of the larger movement of engaged Buddhism and related their struggles as Buddhists to other historical struggles, e.g. in Sri Lanka, Tibet, Taiwan, or Vietnam. As such, their engagements transcended the specific locale of Hong Kong and reached beyond Hong Kong and China.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I showed how my informants engaged with the Umbrella Movement in a variety of spiritually and actively engaged ways. While some went to the protest sites, others stayed at home to meditate. Again others decided to disengage from the protests altogether. While different in terms of civic engagement, there is significant similarity in these narratives regarding the perception of how to act as 'good' Buddhists. Taken together, all of these personal narratives are related to religious notions of salvation: being spiritually or actively engaged or disengaged will lead to a reduction

61 Personal communication via WhatsApp, Emily, September-October 2014.

of suffering and, by extension, will bring people a step closer to reaching Nirvāṇa.

Based on the individual narratives presented above, I argue that religion as expressed by my Buddhist informants indicates civic engagement in politics to be not so much an issue of the relationship between religion and politics, but more about future salvation and personal responsibilities to act as 'good' Buddhists. For my informants, the Umbrella Movement was not solely a sociopolitical movement aimed at achieving universal suffrage and keeping the HKSAR a politically and economically unique city within the PRC. Equally important were the ideals of engaged Buddhism that were indirectly highlighted, and that developed alongside and in response to other religious movements and institutions in both mainland China and globally.

My Buddhist informants' reflections on the Umbrella Movement revealed that their decisions to engage in the Movement were related to commitments made on an individual basis. While some Buddhists found it important to actively or spiritually engage with the protests, and to try to bring an open mindset to the movement, others used similar arguments to not get involved, and to not worsen the polarities already rife in Hong Kong society. Even though Buddhist motivations were all based on the same religion, my informants all expressed different answers and subsequent outcomes, indicating the diversity of the religion and, more specifically, the plurality of (engaged) Buddhism.

This shows that although informed by disciplinary and historical religious decrees, aspirations to salvation are primarily personal. Individuals need not necessarily follow the same political practices as those advanced by the religious organizations to which they belong, nor of the religious leaders representing them. In effect, while many individuals are undoubtedly influenced by religious structures and leadership, they make decisions based on personal considerations and choices. This is most apparent in cases where the authority of religious leaders and organizations is fragmented, such as in the case of Buddhism.

It also attests that the Umbrella Movement was not merely a local movement sparked by context-specific politico-economic factors. Instead, the narratives surrounding the Umbrella Movement were related to larger temporal religious movements taking place in different times and regions. This can be compared to Kuo's argument that, influenced by social gospel agenda and 'public theology' (following American Christian fundamentalism of the 1980s), Christian leaders started to promote 'public theology' post-1997, by commenting on social, economic, and political policies in

both Hong Kong and the PRC, much to the annoyance of the CCP. For my Buddhist informants, international norms have come to play a role in the Umbrella Movement as well, although less present. For them, these larger temporal movements were initiated by renowned engaged Buddhist leaders of various Buddhist schools; for example, Thich Nhat Hanh and the Dalai Lama. Consequently, for them the Umbrella Movement extended beyond the spatial boundaries of the HKSAR and the PRC, and beyond the temporal dimension of the Movement.

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