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RIVISTA PER LO SVILUPPO SOSTENIBILE

The strains of Hong Kong

Ettore Iorio & Irene Licastro

Hong Kong, for a long time in the spotlight of the international media, which over the years have reported on the evolution of the protests born from the dissent and resistance of the young students of the 'Perfumed Harbour' (determined not to bow down to the Chinese annexation process), is now experiencing a phase of attrition. The city is suffering from a profound weariness, born of the fatigue of years of demonstrations organised by the 'Umbrella Movement' and now exhausted by the daily forms of repression and coercion put in place by the Mainland (1).

On 20 May 2020, the National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China passed the National Security Law, which came into force on 30 June of the same year, ending the city's democratic freedoms and the concept of 'One System, Two Countries' - the result of the 1997 Sino-British understanding that, in handing Hong Kong back to China, after having been part of the British Empire since 1842, established a 50-year transitional period in which the Mainland pledged autonomy to the city, in terms of respect for the democratic system and individual freedoms.

In fact, a differentiated regime and sphere of autonomy were recognised as long as it was useful for China to have a bridge-city with the Western world, so as to develop its global trade and then, after consolidating its global economic network, invest politically and economically in the more reliable Shanghai. Hong Kong in recent years has also been abandoned by the West, which has not had the courage, except for a few declarations of support for the protests and some economic sanctions, to support and defend the city's independence from China.

Today, the Perfumed Harbour is a symbolic city, a medal with the worst faces of the two systems that contend for world leadership; on the one hand, it suffers from the strong social inequalities caused by an exasperated capitalist-financial system and, on the other, it is oppressed by the authoritarian Chinese system and the consequent deprivation of all the fundamental freedoms - political and of expression - that have always been recognised by its citizens. A city where the clash between these two models has left invisible wreckage, hidden by the opulence of the palaces of global finance, which suddenly becomes apparent when, strolling through the streets of the metropolis among luxury cars, one comes across the extreme poverty to which the majority of the population is relegated.

Today, in the silence of the international media, receiving news about the city and how the girls and boys actually live is really complicated. A testimony of everyday life in Hong Kong can be obtained mainly from those who still live in the city today, such as Irene Licastro, a young economics student at the Sapienza University of Rome, who has just returned from Hong Kong after six months of thesis research, and who recounts it this way:

"If you are about twenty years old and live in Hong Kong, you know you have two choices. The first is to leave, the second is to play the game. A game in which there is only one player who holds both the pawns

and the dice. Living among Hongkongers in Kowloon, the most popular district in the SAR (Special Administrative Region), I could feel every single difference between the locals and those from Mainland China.

I think the typical Hong Kong breakfast is the epitome of their cultural synthesis: scrambled eggs with toast and noodle soup. But if you ask a Hong Konger if he feels more Chinese or more English, he will tell you neither. Hongkongers feel Hong Kong, and nowhere else in the world.

To understand it, you have to look closely at its geography - the city is not only Asia's main financial hub and a playground for wealthy Chinese, it is a special administrative region consisting of an island divided into three districts: Hong Kong Island, the largest island and home of finance, as well as the residence of expats and the rich; Kowloon, the real beating heart of the city where Hongkongers live and where there is great cultural and political ferment; and finally the New Territories, made up of numerous small islands in the South China Sea and large urban districts that are in effect large dormitories where the migrant and poorer population lives."

The concentration of wealth and capital in the city of Hong Kong is directly proportional to the extreme poverty to which most of the resident population is relegated. It is no coincidence that the city has the highest Gini (2) coefficient in the whole of Asia, with a score of 47.3% ahead of Singapore, another financial capital, with 45.2%. Inequality and poverty are aggravated by an extremely difficult housing situation, with one of the highest densities in the world, at 7,000 inhabitants per square kilometre, and thousands of people living in 'cage houses' of just a few square metres placed one on top of the other.

Among the most emblematic places of the extreme poverty conditions in which most Hong Kongers live is Tai O, a village only 30 minutes from the financial hub, where the inhabitants live by selling dried fish that they manage to catch from their stilt houses.

"When I went to Tai O village, I saw the real Hong Kong for the first time. In the islands, the living situation is completely different from the life that flows between the skyscrapers of Hong Kong Island.

There one can see images of great hardship and misery, such as houses made of aluminium foil or stilts built over a dried-up river. In most of these dwellings there are no toilets and no electric or gas cookers.

The 'houses' are so small throughout the city that most of them do not even have space for a kitchen. It is no coincidence that Hong Kong has developed a street food tradition over the years, precisely because so many people without a kitchen live off take-away food.

In this socio-economic context, protests have developed against the slow but inexorable process of annexation to China, which today, having quelled the uprising movements and imprisoned their representatives, aims to erase the city's Western past in order to form a new generation entirely devoted to the Mainland.

The National Security Act has given agents the power to arrest anyone accused of 'terrorist activities', a concept that has been interpreted decisively broadly, leading in recent years to the arrest of pro-democracy politicians, newspaper editors like Jimmy Lai, owner of the Apple Daily, one of Hong Kong's largest newspapers that had openly criticised the city's government, or ordinary citizens often subjected to summary trials and released only on the understanding that they would behave 'in accordance' with the Chinese government's instructions. The process of annexation also involves the elimination of any Western or pro-democracy cultural contamination through, for example, the censorship of films or books.

"Cantonese is spoken in Hong Kong - which differs from Mandarin in characters, pronunciation and historical origins. The central government has imposed Mandarin as the only language in schools and the teaching of history according to the Chinese version. Thus, in the coming years, Mandarin will also become compulsory in universities and will gradually replace Cantonese for good - leading to exclusion from all social and work contexts and identification as a 'rebel' for anyone who continues to speak the original language.

When I arrived in Hong Kong, the National Security Act had imposed a ban on more than three people walking in the street; this law was pronounced by all the megaphones in the city, especially on Avenue of Stars, one of the busiest streets in Hong Kong.

The police who operate in the city today, for the most part, are not from Hong Kong but are the Chinese police who remained there after the central government, during the protests, sent numerous contingents to quell them.

No Hong Kongers, in fact, want to enlist - because policemen are seen as traitors to Hong Kong, as an enemy force that daily carries on the process of annexation and repression. At the same time, however, the guys in the city avoid talking about the period of protests for fear that their interlocutor might report it to the Chinese authorities'.

After three years of the 'Zero Covid' policy, Hong Kong is reopening itself to the world. Recently, in fact, the 'Hello, Hong Kong' global promotion campaign was announced, involving the free distribution of 500,000 airline tickets to boost the city's tourism and image, after years in which the combination of the health emergency and the clash between the population and the Chinese authorities had made the 'Perfumed Harbour' less attractive to tourists and investors.

As of this year, the 'new' Hong Kong opens its doors to the world and it will be interesting to see what effects this reopening will have on Hong Kong society; whether, above all, it will show itself 'peacefully' in its pro-Chinese version or whether it will take advantage of its new-found global dimension to turn the international spotlight back on the process of democratic erosion it is undergoing, fuelling once again the temporarily dormant but still lively spirit of protests and the struggle for freedom.

Walking around the city, one can breathe in the purest essence of Hong Kong society - which makes cultural sophistication the communicative medium to tell the world about its unique history and strong intellectual identity.

In recent years, in fact, numerous galleries and cultural centres have sprung up in the various areas of the city, making it, to date, the main artistic pole in the whole of Asia. Primacy consecrated by the inauguration of the M+ museum in the West Kowloon cultural district, a 65,000 square metre structure (almost twice the size of the Tate Modern) dedicated to 20th and 21st century visual culture.

Just as between the luxurious flats of the skyscrapers of the financial city and the cage houses of the working-class suburbs, so the contrast between large cultural institutions and the repression of small independent cultural realities shows, once again, the double face of a city full of contradictions.

During the years of the protests, culture and information were the driving force behind the movements; they were difficult to quell precisely because they were not the bearers of instinctive and extemporaneous dissent, but of a democratic vision of the city based on a solid collective awareness and cultural tradition.

It is no coincidence that the Chinese government, after suppressing the protests, immediately hit independent bookshops, newspapers and cultural centres - preventing the circulation of books and newspapers or banning the organisation of events that in any way could propagate ideas of democracy and freedom.

Over the years, there have been numerous disappearances and arrests, as in the case of Lee Bo, owner of the 'Mighty Current' publishing house, who disappeared suddenly together with his partner, Gui Minhai, taken from his home while on holiday in Thailand and then reappeared a month later in a video message, broadcast on television, in which he stated that he had voluntarily handed himself over to the Chinese authorities.

Today, in the city streets, in the most popular suburbs, it is still possible to find a few underground bookshops that still manage to survive Chinese censorship where, despite the pervasive control of the Chinese government and the daily risk of being arrested, Hong Kong citizens devise ways to express their dissent and their desire for freedom, even through small actions in their daily lives.

"Two distinguishing features of citizens who express their closeness to the protest movements are the wearing of yellow masks and dressing completely in black, colours that have become over the years, together with umbrellas, symbols of the protests.

One way to dissent, silently, in Hong Kong is to only frequent businesses belonging to the 'yellow economy', i.e. the set of shops, bookshops, bars and restaurants that are openly pro-democracy.

Some online platforms indicate these shops in yellow, pro-Chinese shops in blue, and neutral shops in green, to guide citizens in their choice.

Particularly in the Mong Kok area, walking among the skyscrapers, one can come across bookshops hidden among the flats where one can find books and testimonies related to the protests - and inside them on the walls hang the umbrellas used for the last non-violent demonstrations in 2019.

In contrast, in the central areas Hong Kongers avoid going to Starbucks, as the owner of the city's chain is avowedly pro-China; similarly, no one uses Tik Tok, considered the Mainland's iconic social network.

In recent months, the most representative image for me of the current situation in Hong Kong has been the famous 'Democracy wall', where flyers inviting students to pro-democracy initiatives and meetings were once posted, and now completely empty. At the same time, however, hearing Hong Kongers talk about the 'Lion Rock', one of Hong Kong's seven mountains - located right above the popular area of Kowloon, which they consider to be the city's protective mountain - one can perceive in their words all the hope they still have for a free future.

Notes

- (1) Mainland China' refers to all territories under the direct control of the Chinese Communist Party in 1949. At that time, Hong Kong and Macau were still colonial territories administered by the British and Portuguese respectively, and Taiwan (a former Japanese colony) was under the control of the transfugal government of the Republic of China. For this reason, the term Mainland China does not include these territories (Ed).
- (2) A measure of economic inequality, where 0 is perfect equality and 100 is the monopoly of an individual (Ed).