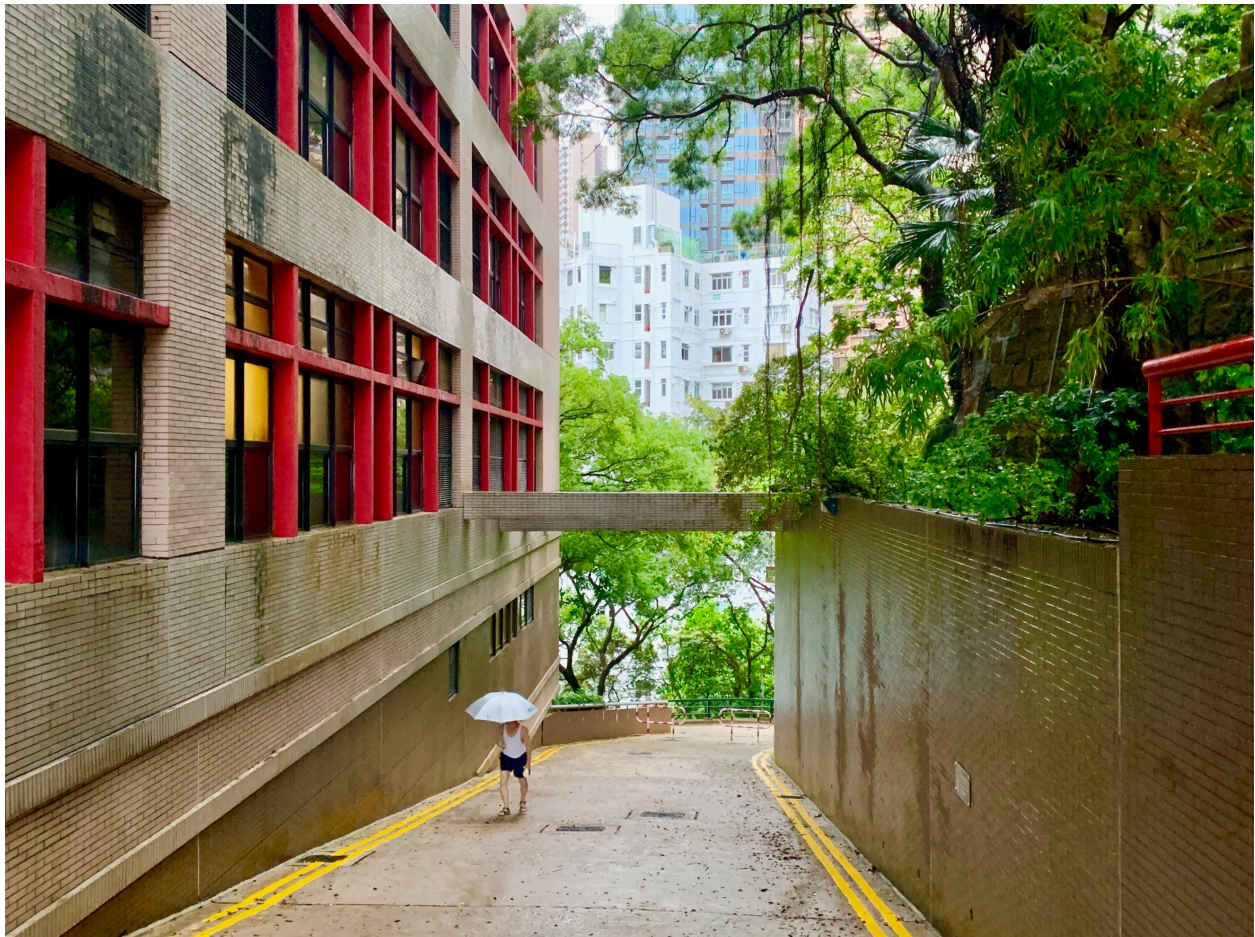


# There is no Neutral Ground in Hong Kong

*Or anywhere else, for that matter*

Jacob Walter



*A rainy September morning on an unassuming corner of the Hong Kong University campus. Photo by Jacob Walter*

**Every weekday afternoon on the Hong Kong University campus**, two long, fast-moving lines form heading down the elevator to the MTR station (Murderer Transit Railway, as denoted by the graffiti on the ground). Hong Kong's train network, the MTR, has hosted many encounters between Hong Kong protesters and police the past summer and the space between the two lines has become a regular site of pro-democracy posters, banners, and demonstrations from HKU students, including, on the particular day I was waiting in line, a sign asking students to boycott the MTR over their cooperation with the Hong Kong police in the recent Hong Kong protests.

I found myself intuitively dodging a flyer held out in my direction, determined to avoid any association with the protests lest I lend any credibility to the rumors of foreign involvement in the movement circulated by the Chinese Communist Party. I do,

however, tend to imagine myself standing in silent solidarity with the protests where possible, and I could not exempt myself from this particular request to boycott the MTR.

A call in Cantonese came from one of the masked demonstrators to which at least half of the crowd around me responded. I heard a round of four or five call and response slogans from untraceable voices all around me before I stepped into the elevator. The crowd was just large enough to provide anonymity for students willing to participate in the middle of their daily routine, while the masks give greater anonymity to those who would otherwise be recognized as the leaders. On one hand, the need for a leaderless, anonymous movement seems to point to the fact that HKU students do not enjoy full democracy or freedom of speech, but on the other hand, this cooperative anonymity seems to give everyone present an equal voice in a profound and dignified stand for democracy. I began to realize that the protestors had tactfully managed to perform a democratic gesture in a space which is not explicitly democratic, and I also realized that I was unavoidably implicated.

**But what does it really mean for a space to be democratic?** People tend to evaluate democratic spaces in terms of who occupies or is allowed to occupy the space, but there is a whole other set of questions around which kinds of activities a space supports or discourages and which kinds of voices it privileges or silences.

Many people are familiar with the notion that a round table affords greater potential for equality and democracy. Of course, in the real world, a round table cannot seat 7.5 million people and political discourse often occurs haphazardly across different metaphorical and physical boundaries. Many political efforts work to reconcile these differences and elevate underrepresented voices to have equal purchase. Even when these efforts are deemed successful, there lies a fundamental paradox between the fact that a space must be designed with a specific context in mind in order to foster democracy and the fact that the relationship between designer and user is, even at its best, far from democratic.

At Hong Kong University, demonstrators challenge the purported neutrality of the spaces they occupy by drawing attention to the implicit hierarchies within them. These demonstrators act as both architect and activist at once, leveling the playing field. Every few days, a new message appears spray painted on the brick sidewalk before it is scrubbed or blasted away the following night. But mottled traces of spray paint inevitably remain, a constant reminder that the campus is in a very literal sense contested ground. The protestor's graffiti might be seen not as an end in itself, but rather a performative provocation which demands a response from the university. Either the university takes the "neutral" course of action which implicitly endorses the graffiti message by leaving it be, or else they actively choose to erase the protestor's message and hire discrete after-hours cleaning crews to restore the political "neutrality" of the space.

Similarly, the call to boycott the MTR attempts to dismantle neutrality to everyone waiting in line, including foreigners consciously avoiding direct involvement in the movement. We are either apathetic towards if not complicit in the MTR's actions, or else we are forced to go out of our way in our daily routine just to maintain a "neutral" position in the conflict.

However, the demonstrators take care not to say, “you’re either with us or you’re against us.” The current protest movement is distinguished by its continuous accommodation of competing obligations in the lives of protestors. The protests and demonstrations this summer have been organized on weekends and weekday evenings. Disruptions and damage to transportation and public services have most commonly been limited to short periods to make a point without hurting the city or its working residents. The 9-5 students and workers who must continue to work, commute via MTR, and generally subsist are just as important to the movement as the performers standing on the sidewalk every day. The demonstrators on HKU campus wear face masks to round the corners of the table, to subvert the power structures inherent to the space and activity, and to include the voices needed in a truly democratic movement.

**The conflicts built into Hong Kong run deeper than brief political demonstrations can show** but like the conflict between subsistence and protest, are often folded seamlessly into daily Hong Kong life. It may not matter to any member of the pro-democracy movement that the demonstration I witnessed could only be staged in front of a large group of people comfortably waiting in an orderly line, a social practice that Hong Kong could only have inherited from the British. But other remnants of British colonialism (invocations of the Queen or the Union Jack, for example) occasionally crop up in the protests and leave the sour lingering taste of an antidemocratic imperial regime.

Hong Kong is often celebrated as a monument to global capitalism as well as a bastion of free expression in Asia, but even in a supposedly free market of opinions and ideas, ultimate authority over the ideas produced is placed collectively in the hands of consumers in the form of market preferences. Authors, artists, and thinkers are often limited to producing ideas which are likely to sell. While many activists attempt to use digital media to organize politically and subvert oppressive power dynamics, digital media can also aid the consolidation of opinions in algorithm-generated echo chambers. New spaces generated blindly by market preferences are more prone to reinforcing or exacerbating existing inequalities than challenging or subverting them.

The protestors at Hong Kong University cannot identify, much less remedy, all of the mechanisms of political inequality at play in Hong Kong or the world today, nor should they feel obligated to in order to make their case for democracy. They do, however, offer a useful point of resistance against the inherited power dynamics of their own campus space which could set an example for understanding and addressing broader mechanisms of inequality in Hong Kong and elsewhere. The demonstrators proved to me that democracy must take place in spaces of conflict and skepticism between action and design, that any kind of space gives rise to certain power dynamics which may be subsequently explored, exploited, or challenged through performance.

Hong Kong doesn’t need democracy to free itself from the legacy of British colonial rule or the spoils of unrestrained capitalism or to rescue itself from the impending doom of the Chinese Communist Party. As far as I can tell, Hong Kong needs democracy in spite of everything it has endured and accomplished by other means. The demonstrators at Hong Kong University are ready to challenge the very fabric of the space they inhabit in the name of democracy, and maybe the rest of us should be too.