

The restless young are easily persuaded to turn to protest movements



With the passage of time, the generation that brought an ethic of hard work gradually vanished in Hong Kong. PHOTO: BLOOMBERG

HK losing its work-ethic edge over S'pore

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Founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew praised the work ethic and high efficiency of Hong Kong people during the 1960s and 1970s.

"The people were hard-working, goods were cheap, service was excellent," the late Mr Lee said in his book, *From Third World To First*. He attributed the better quality of Hong Kong people to the influx of one to two million refugees when the communists took over the mainland in 1949. These refugees, who were entrepreneurs, professionals and intellectuals, formed a layer of talent to transform Hong Kong into a modern city of the world. This was what Singapore was lacking in comparison 40 to 50 years ago.

Hong Kong, located at the southern tip of Guangdong province, like Singapore had been a small fishing village. Waves of immigration provided much-needed manpower for the growth of the colony. The largest immigrant inflows were when the communists defeated the Kuomintang government. Businessmen and industrialists from Shanghai fled to Hong Kong. Some civil servants and military personnel chose to stay in Hong Kong instead of following the Kuomintang to Taiwan. To them, Hong Kong was their last haven, and they had to work hard to survive, without any other options. This strengthened the hard-working spirit of Hong Kong.

However, with the passage of time, the generation that brought entrepreneurship and an ethic of hard work gradually vanished. There were no more large-scale immigrant inflows from the mainland to replenish the older generation, as the colonial government had tightened control on immigration from China. There were immigrants from Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and nearby regions, but their stock and character were not the same as those from China.

Even for the limited immigrants allowed from China, the character and quality had changed under the education and culture of communist China. By the early 1990s, the profile of Hong Kong residents had changed, from political refugees who had nowhere else to go, to those mostly locally born and bred.

The new generation was generally better educated, and also willing and able to emigrate to other countries. When the 1997 handover of sovereignty to China was approaching, many Hong Kong residents acquired a foreign passport to resettle in Britain, Australia, New Zealand and Canada. Many had, in fact, emigrated to these countries, and returned to Hong Kong only after the handover when they saw nothing much had changed.

The younger generation, born and bred in Hong Kong, did not have the same resilience of the older folk. Colonial education equipped them with the basic tools for making a living, but not with the identity of being a Hong Konger and affinity for the place.

Many did not have a strong attachment to Hong Kong and were prepared to emigrate to other places. A significant proportion had even fewer feelings towards the mainland and did not consider themselves Chinese citizens. The Beijing government, however,

viewed them as Hong Kong patriots. A gap of understanding between them and the central government existed.

DEMOCRACY CAMPAIGNS LURE STUDENTS

The British tried to enlarge the gap by promoting democracy in Hong Kong. The British government, despite the signing of the Joint Declaration in 1984, sought to implement reforms to the political structure. Mr Chris Patten, the last governor, added nine new functional constituencies and expanded the existing functional constituencies in the elections of September 1995. The purpose was, in the British view, to ensure that democracy would prevail after the handover. The Western media echoed this with its support of the reforms, with a view to democratise China through Hong Kong. This angered China, and Beijing set up a rival provisional legislature in Shenzhen to replace the one created by Governor Patten once sovereignty was handed over.

Western media and affiliated organisations played the role of democracy campaigners by issuing reports and statements critical of the Hong Kong and Beijing governments. They encouraged local political parties in the pro-democracy camp to adopt confrontational campaigns against the government. The campaigns spread to local universities, where some members of teaching staff organised protest movements and young students were encouraged to join in.

The traditional protests in Hong Kong are the June 4 mass rallies and July 1 protest marches. The numbers of protesters range from 50,000 to 80,000, and they are largely peaceful and orderly. Last year, however, the Occupy Central protest paralysed the city centre and shopping spots from Sept 28 to Dec 15.

Young students boycotted classes and spent their time in makeshift camps which they erected on public roads. The disruption to daily life of ordinary citizens was widespread, and the negative impact on economic activities was extensive. There was nothing creative or innovative in Occupy Central. It was merely a copycat of the Occupy Wall Street movement in New York in 2011. The inconvenience and the damage created were prolonged and extensive. One wonders how intelligent young people in Hong Kong could lose their common sense in wasting time and energy in staging the protest.

YOUNG, IDEALISTIC AND DISILLUSIONED

It is true that young people are idealistic and innocent. They can be easily persuaded to champion whatever they consider to be worthwhile causes. The May Fourth Movement in China started with student protests. But young and innocent students were exploited and played the leading part in the disastrous Cultural Revolution from 1966-1976 and in the Tiananmen incident in 1989. In Singapore, students boycotted classes in the 1950s. In Taiwan last year, students stormed the Legislative Building and occupied it for an extended period, known as the Sunflower Movement.

Young people in Hong Kong have been restless, probably because of the uncertainty of getting a secure job. The lack of public housing and skyrocketing prices of private

apartments have also shattered their dream of house ownership. They are idealistic and want changes. They may wrongly believe that democracy can solve all, or most, of their problems. They seem to be naive. But as they grow older and assume greater responsibility for their family, they will mature and realise that working hard is the only way

towards solving their problems. Mr Lee was right back then in urging Singaporeans to learn from Hong Kong people in terms of their greater efficiency and ethic of hard work. But times have changed and the people in Hong Kong have also changed. The Shanghaiese entrepreneurs have largely disappeared. The skilled workforce has more alternatives in earning a

decent living, either in Hong Kong or, for example, Sydney. They may not need to work as hard as older generations 50 years ago.

The advantage of Hong Kong people over Singaporeans may soon diminish. For the time being, however, the pace of work is still faster and service is still better in Hong Kong. As long as Hong Kongers can maintain the lead in

work performance, Singaporeans still have something to learn from them.

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