

Periphery of the Periphery: Liberal Chinese Students' Struggle between Nationalism at Home and the Anti-Extradition Movement in Hong Kong

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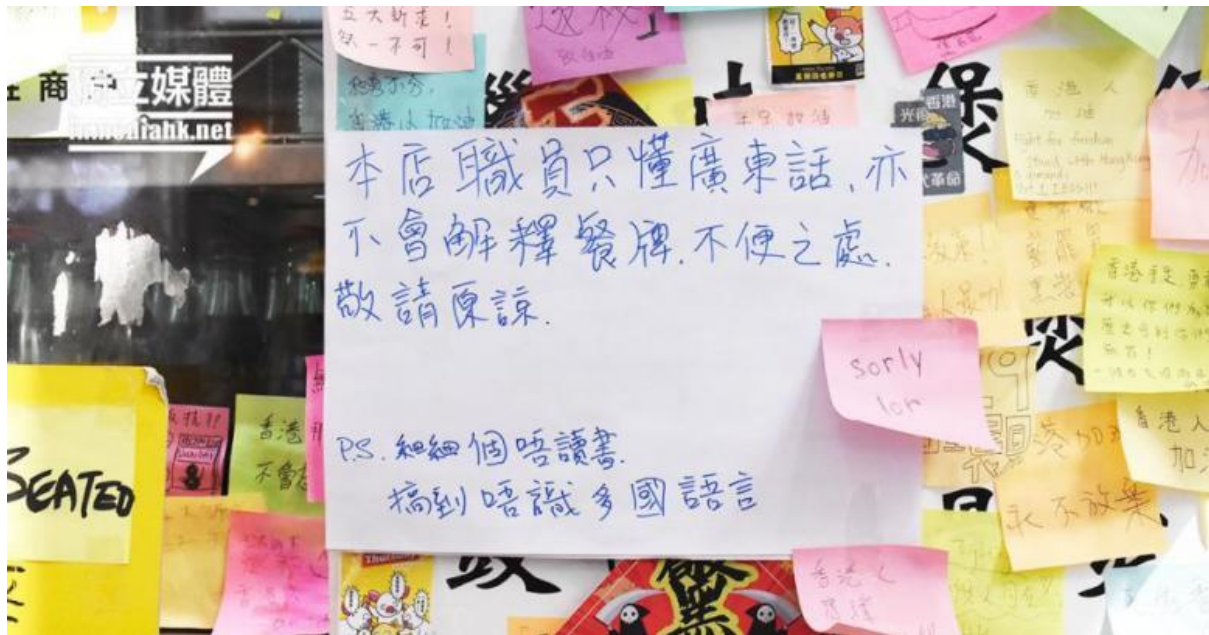
My final year project looked into the experience of relatively liberal-minded mainland Chinese students studying in Hong Kong during the anti-extradition movement (“AEM”) that started in 2019. While the sentiments in mainland China were predominantly firmly against the movement, many of these students were relatively supportive of the movement. As a result, they faced huge pressure not only from the Chinese state, but also from their mainland peers in Hong Kong, as well as their friends and families living in the mainland. At the same time, they were often marginalized in the local society for their “mainlander” identity. The project demonstrated a kind of “double-marginalization” faced by this group of students, who were in a very special position in the movement – at the periphery of the periphery.

From the mainland side, apart from the more commonly discussed state censorship from the Chinese government, which was clearly prevalent, informants were also concerned with spontaneous *jubao* (“reporting”) by their peers. Such “reporting” was organized through well-established networks of mainland students, largely driven by nationalist sentiments. The high level of segregation of mainland student communities from local communities also meant that once “reported”, these students could face very serious and long-term consequences. The project showed that *jubao* was a major reason that stopped informants from expressing any pro-AEM and even neutral opinion.

On the other hand, it also seemed quite impossible for these students to join the “Hong Kong” side, because the AEM was so fundamentally based on identity politics. Being a “Hongkonger” seemed to be a central criterion for one to be included in the movement. One example that deserved attention was the “Glory Restaurant (光榮冰室)” incident (see fig. 1), when a local pro-AEM restaurant refused to serve “mandarin speakers”. In response, a group of mainlanders went to the restaurant for a “conversation”, labelling themselves as “new immigrant brothers¹ (新移民手足)”. They were soon fiercely criticized and rejected by the

¹ The term “brother (手足)” was commonly used to refer to “fellow supporters” in the AEM

local community. While the reason behind the rejection was much more complicated, identity certainly played an important role.



(Fig. 1: Notice posted in front of Glory Restaurant)²

Finally, the project explored how informants understood, rationalized and presented their own identities and political stances, their relative “openness”, and their “love for the country” in response to this situation of “double-marginalization”. Some informants intentionally distanced themselves from the “Chinese” identity, for example, by referring to China as “your country (你國)” during conversations with their mainland friends. Some simply avoided the discussion of identity, while others attempted to construct a new identity and community outside of the existing discourse. The findings of this project illustrated important dynamics that keep even the most liberal-minded individuals in an inter-group conflict from facilitating reconciliation, especially at the interpersonal level.

² Image by Hong Kong In-media