From Inside Isolated Hong Kong - Melancholy and Hope

Battleground Hong Kong! In the last 6 months I have kept on coming here, almost every month.

Nothing has changed and everything has changed. Clearly, in the recent history, nothing damaged this great cosmopolitan city as much as the violent riots of pro-Western individuals, backed by the U.S., U.K., German, Taiwan’s and other anti-communist governments. The new type of coronavirus (COVID-19) has smashed almost everything that was still left standing, to pieces.

Landing at Hong Kong International Airport on February 23, I saw countless rows of proud Cathay Pacific and Cathay Dragon jets grounded, blocking huge spaces between the terminals. Grounded were also airplanes of relatively new Hong Kong Airlines. One of the greatest airports on Earth was empty, and so were most of the seats on high-speed trains connecting the terminals with the city.

My hotel, usually bustling with the visitors from Mainland China, was empty, too. I was the only one checking in at the reception. A clerk was wearing a mask. He recognized me, welcomed me back, and then, suddenly and without warning, pulled out a high-tech thermometer, pointed it at my forehead and pressed the bottom.

“36.4!” He announced triumphantly. “Normal”.

I was wondering why he just didn’t ask me whether I would mind or not. I would not protest; I’d definitely allow him to measure my temperature. But like this, it was odd. Perhaps rude. But both of us were wearing masks. We looked at each other, and at the end, he apologized.

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“Everything is now different, isn’t it?” I was told by one of the high-ranking police officers. We exchanged WhatsApp messages, arranging a meeting.

A few days before my arrival, a doctor, one of my reader and a friend, wrote me an email, basically trying to convince me to cancel my plans to return to the city:

“I think it is not advisable for you to come here. And, there will be no concert...”

He was taking about the legendary choir of Prague Philharmonics. It was scheduled to perform here on February 27. We had managed to reserve tickets. But the concert got cancelled.

Everything, all over the city, was getting cancelled, including a huge art festival, one of the most important on the Asian continent: “The Hong Kong Arts Festival.”

The borders with Mainland China were closing down, one after another. Tourism collapsed. Economy was screaming. Rioters were clashing with police, trying to prevent quarantine centers from becoming operational.

Nobody knew what the next day would bring. Consensus was, most likely, nothing good.

A Hong Kong newspaper, which has been publishing my essays for months, could not remunerate my work, because its staff have been asked to work from home, and therefore could not get their hands on computers that might
release payments.

My favorite local dive, “New Five Dragon Congee & Noodle Restaurant” was still open and happy to feed me. But inside, there were hardly any customers. Neighborhood Starbucks kept its doors open, too. But a plenty of shops and services appeared to be hermetically shut down. Everybody has been wearing masks: passengers on buses and trams, waitresses, and even pedestrians.

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Precautions, of course. But for how long can a huge, international city survive on precautions?

Everything here is coming to a standstill. Yet almost nothing is officially shut down. Formally, Hong Kong’s economy is collapsing. Yet there is no sense of acute emergency. Unlike in such places like Buenos Aires, where sidewalks get covered by homeless families during the economic crisis, in Hong Kong, there are no signs of misery.

This former British colony may be, at least partially, still controlled by several ruthless local oligarchs, but it is becoming clear that Beijing’s rule, direct and indirect, is offering solutions and several ways out of the crisis.

The government is clearly not giving up on the city.

On February 26, 2020, The Los Angeles Times reported that Hong Kong unveiled a new budget package for its injured city:

“The main feature of the annual budget announced Wednesday is a payment of the U.S. equivalent of $1,284 to each permanent resident of the city 18 or older, aiding a population “overwhelmed by a heavy atmosphere,” Financial Secretary Paul Chan said. Chan estimated the deficit will reach a record $17.9 billion in the coming fiscal year.”

“The administration of Chief Executive Carrie Lam is seeking to stop the slide of the collapsing economy, rolling out the boldest budget in recent years amid blame for government inertia. Months of political unrest over China’s role in the city pushed Hong Kong last year into its first annual recession in a decade, with economists forecasting a second annual contraction in 2020 as disruptions from the coronavirus outbreak further depress output.”

It is 1,284 US$, not HK$, a substantial sum for the Hong Kong inhabitants. And that is not all; there will be several other major incentives provided in the coming months.

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While Hong Kong rioters, together with their foreign handlers, are methodically smearing all that comes from Beijing, China is confidently extending helping hand, even as it faces own problems with both coronavirus and the ongoing Western attacks, including those related to trade.

While Mainland China and Hong Kong are fighting with great determination both coronavirus and social impact of the crisis on the citizens, nihilist rioters are periodically attacking all potential quarantine centers, as well as hospitals where coronavirus patients are supposed to be treated.

But it appears that the city is waking up. Protests are losing momentum and support of the citizens. On the one hand, it is evident that solutions to the present crisis will not come from the West and its implants. On the other hand, it is clear that both local and Chinese government are feverishly looking for the way forward.

Hong Kong is definitely going through a profound crisis. It may even collapse, soon; collapse as the city that we used to know, for decades.

Riots brought to surface some extremist emotions. They were analyzed, considered for a while, and then rejected.

Coronavirus both divided and united the city.

Yes, Hong Kong may soon collapse, as we know it. But the new city will be born. Or at least, a new chapter in its history will start.

I believe that the riots and the medical emergency, both, finally initiated a true return of Hong Kong to China. It may
sound a little bit paradoxical, but it is logical.

Hong Kong got a glimpse of where it would, at least hypothetically, find itself should it suddenly leave PRC. The sentiment of the majority is clear: despite everything, we should stay where we belong - in China.

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