

The causes and methods may be new but, in essence, the 'post-1980s' activists aren't very different from their predecessors – young, angry and with a point to make

Rocking the boat

Stephen Vines

“The trouble with young people today...” How often have you read these words, or something similar? For many years, young people in Hong Kong were criticised for being apathetic about social and political affairs; now they are castigated for irresponsible involvement in social and political movements. And when the criticism falters, there is a barrage of patronising talk, mainly from government officials, about how, if only they understood, they wouldn't criticise. It is hard to know how to respond to all this, especially when much of what is being said is presented as new and original thinking, whereas it is nothing of the kind. The agonising over the development of the so-called post-1980s generation in Hong Kong mirrors concerns, and, yes, excitement, over the development of protest movements in other generations. Sure, there are differences in emphasis and differences in the way people mobilise but, in essence, things have not changed – youth gravitates towards change. Let us first consider the situation in the late 1960s, a time of unrest around the world but mostly expressed in Hong Kong by leftists emulating the activities of the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution. The history of this movement, like all history, is written by the victors, in this case the Hong Kong establishment, which has succeeded in depicting this period as an

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episode of mindless violence carried out by brainwashed youths who were misled. This is not entirely untrue but it remains a facile interpretation of events. Hong Kong at the time was a relatively poor place rapidly emerging from poverty, yet the benefits of this transition were very unequally distributed. The lingering arrogance of the colonial authorities was out of synch with the changing world and the government had little vision for changing the status quo. In other words, there were perfectly sound reasons for protest and little excuse for the initial attempts to suppress it by force without considering whether there were other ways of addressing people's concerns. Ironically, the person who is probably best placed to understand all this is Tsang Tak-sing, the home affairs minister, who was then a schoolboy protest leader and was thrown in jail on the basis of rather dubious evidence. Now a pillar of the new order, Tsang can shake his head in disapproval at the youthful protesters who are expressing themselves in ways far less violent than his contemporaries, yet are still castigated for irresponsibility. Fast forward from the late 1960s to the 1970s, when students launched a campaign to protest against the Japanese occupation of the Diaoyu Islands. Again, this movement was violently suppressed by the government. Yet these protests continue, albeit nowadays with tacit government backing. And it was around this time that another group of young people formed the Hong Kong Observers, a landmark middle-class movement interested in social change; they certainly had no violent intent but were closely monitored and harassed by the Police Special Branch. Some of the Observers' leading

members became founders of the political parties and movements that flourished a decade later, only to find that their attempts to channel their activities in ways instantly recognisable in the rest of the world were criticised as being quite inappropriate for Hong Kong, posing a danger to stability.

Here we are again with the same old lie being trotted out about dangers to stability. There are even half-hearted attempts to suggest that the very people whose political involvement was nurtured in criticism of the old colonial regime are somehow trying to bring back the old order.

It is quite possible that many of today's young activists are not aware of those who blazed the trail of protest. They may think that mobilising protests by way of Facebook and using the internet means they are doing something very new, but the reality is that this merely implies a change in the means of communication.

Yet there is also something different about youth involvement in current protests because of the extraordinary scope of their interests. Youthful protesters have been at the frontline of heritage preservation demonstrations, have been very active in environmental movements and have linked up in an impressive way with villagers concerned about the disruption to their lives by the new express railway. And, of course, young people are also gravitating towards what might be described as hard-core political and economic issues. Some get involved in established political parties; others simply do their own thing alongside the veterans.

Meanwhile, it should not be overlooked that Hong Kong's best organised political party, the Democratic Alliance for the Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong, is also working from the pro-government side of the fence to mobilise young supporters, with some success, not least because involvement in the DAB offers jobs and other material benefits, something denied to the anti-government camp.

Of course, those who are active in these movements remain strictly in the minority, albeit a growing one. But political activism has always been the preserve of the few rather than the many. It is somewhat childish to revel in the lack of wider mass participation and perverse in the extreme to criticise fine upstanding citizens who devote their time and energies, without material reward, to causes they believe will create a better Hong Kong.

Yet we are told that we need to worry about what's happening to Hong Kong youth. Go figure.

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Rosanna Wong

Ever since the New Year's Day protests, the media has been full of analysis and reports on the so-called "post-1980s" generation. Commentators, the community at large and even government officials have attempted to postulate theories on why this particular group of young people, ranging in age from 20 to 29, has assumed such a public and visible form of expression. While some of these explanations have focused on disillusionment and frustration, others have highlighted a positive emergence of youthful social and civic awareness.

Similarly, while some have characterised the entire generation as "lost", "angry" and "radical", others are wary that the young people who charged the central government's liaison office and who staged the impassioned demonstration against the express rail link are just a minority who are not representative of the entire generation of 20-somethings.

I believe the truth lies somewhere in between. This is a generation that has grown up in the midst of Hong Kong's economic boom and affluence. They are highly educated and are far more knowledgeable and informed thanks to the internet and access to satellite and cable media. They are creative, entrepreneurial and highly motivated to succeed.

They are young people with an international perspective who are increasingly in tune with global concerns such as the environment, human rights, and social and political reforms.

They are also a generation, "post-material" as it were, who have been brought up to think not only about their community but, more importantly, about their own role and civic responsibility within the community.

As such, they are much more willing to volunteer than even the generation before them. And they have no hesitation in getting involved with causes ranging from heritage conservation to climate change and the widening rich-poor divide, as well as fair-trade issues.

They are a generation who wish to see justice and rights manifested and are, in some instances, prepared to raise their voices.

The young people who have taken to the streets over the past few weeks are treading a well-worn path, using public protest to articulate their frustration, discontent, disillusionment and dissatisfaction, and as a means of attracting attention to themselves and their concerns.

While they may not represent their entire age group, they, like youth before in Hong Kong and abroad, just want to be

heard. We in the community must pay attention to this. We must do so without getting distracted by the minutiae of the whys and wherefores of their general sentiment.

The fact is that this post-1980s generation in Hong Kong lacks a platform to be taken seriously. They do not have many avenues for participation in community affairs. Young people, it can be argued, feel excluded – or at least actively discouraged – from assuming their civic right to fully engage in policy debate, public and development issues, and reforms. No doubt this feeling of exclusion of not being taken seriously, has only encouraged some to take to demonstrating and protesting.

I am sure that I am not the only voice calling for the widening of avenues for young people to publicly participate in a meaningful way. I know that legislators, academics and other agency heads have all called on the government to listen more openly to young people.

I applaud this and agree that the different debates and issues facing Hong Kong today need to include young people's perspective. After all, it is their future we are talking about.

However, I also feel that just listening to young people is not enough. Simply having a youth representative on the Commission on Youth is not enough. These are just the first steps.

I believe that the government should harness the willingness of young people to get involved by including them in the wider scheme of consultative and advisory bodies. This would then allow them to express their opinions, while also participating in public debates and implementing decisions.

By providing young people with a chance to be part of a process – whether in terms of policy formulation or discussions on issues of public concern such as the

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high-speed rail link or urban renewal schemes – we will create a generation with a sense of ownership and pride in Hong Kong's future development.

Young people are bound to have a point of view that may not always be in line with those in authority. But this should not be seen as a challenge. Instead, it should be welcomed as an opportunity to widen perspectives to ensure greater community participation and support.

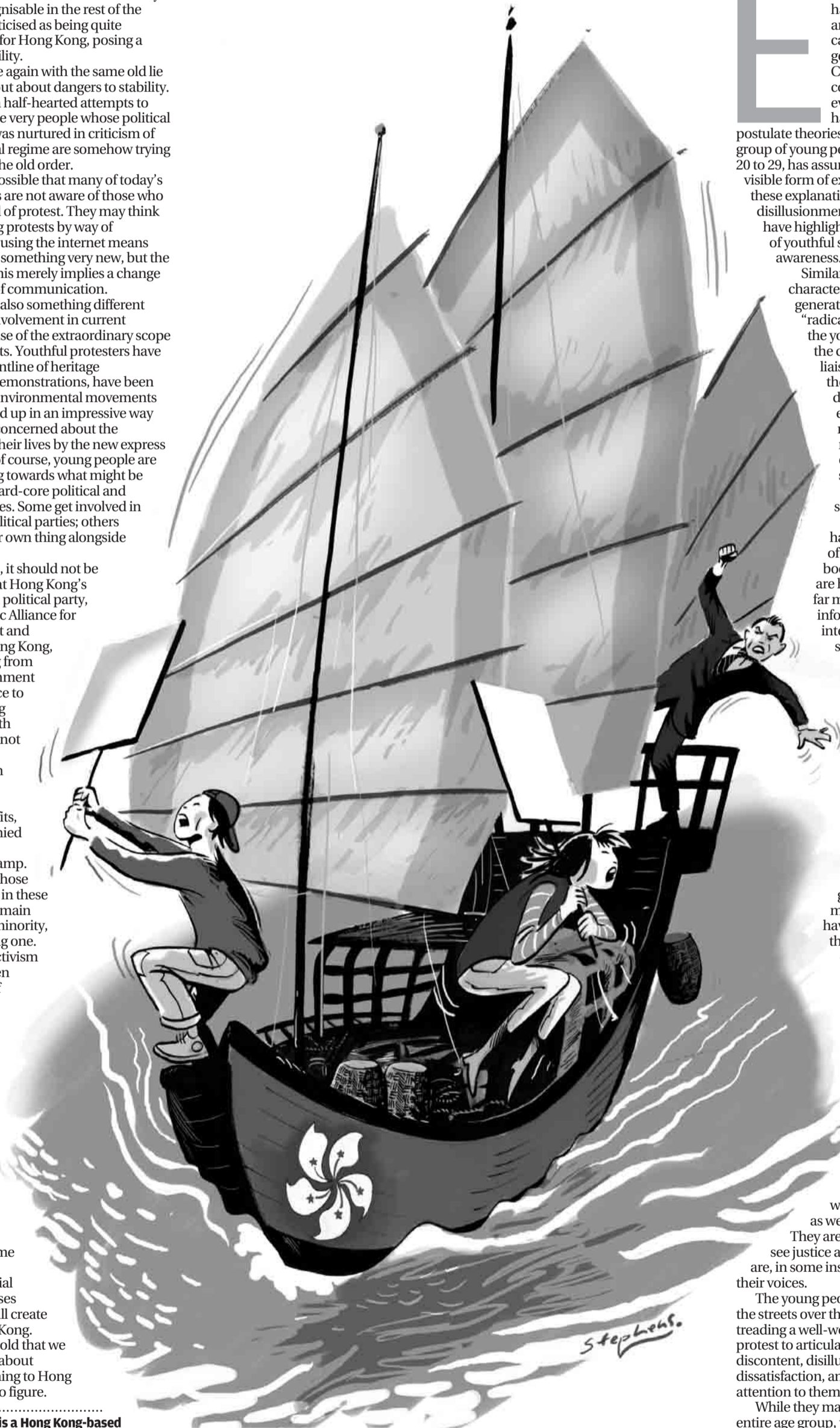
To involve young people in the public process, by giving them a chance, the government must also strengthen its own belief that this younger generation can make a worthwhile and genuine contribution. Only then, I believe, will value be added to how we as a community move forward.

At the moment, the entire issue of protests and young people is extremely emotive. But I think we should use this opportunity to grasp the energy, creativity and talent of this "post-1980s" generation – along with other young people – to increase public involvement.

This really is an opening that has the potential for long-term leadership building, which in turn will help create a mature populace and a sustainable future.

We can all be armchair analysts of youth discontent. Or, we can be the catalysts for change by giving them a chance for actual engagement and participation. The choice is ours.

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Age of change for the fading generation still clinging to power

What is it about the self-titled post-1980s generation protesting against the express rail link? Their grandparents had a certain outlook that was a product of their own time and upbringing. The next generation, the protesters' parents, saw the world somewhat differently and, in turn, influenced the young people today about how they see the world and themselves. Each generation passes on a new set of "social genes" to the next. And, as each generation passes the zenith of its influence on society, there is a transition point where their children take up the mantle. That midway point has been reached and influence is now passing to those born in the 1980s. This may present difficulties to their

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had the benefit of an education, and their entrepreneurialism helped them accumulate wealth. While stability was still important, opportunity made the real difference to one's ultimate achievements. The 1980s was an unsettling period. The Sino-British negotiations over Hong Kong's future led to a decade and a half of angst. Making money was important because it provided choice and a sense of security. The post-1997 period influenced how the parents and their children born in the 1980s saw life in Hong Kong.

Both the parents and their children began to see what they considered to be institutional decay in government. Rightly or wrongly, family chitchat has been about the decline of competence in public affairs, creating a widespread sense that Hong Kong is on the decline, which is deeply frustrating.

The emergence of the 1980s generation in protests on numerous issues may be a turning point in the upheaval, when the values of the existing social and political order are questioned, and a new set of values is being shaped. Is a spark about to ignite a sense of malaise? Political trust has worn extremely thin. What will it take to make things implode? Compounding this is a widespread distrust of the rich, as seen from constant public complaints about "business-government collusion".

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The electoral system of functional constituencies does not help, as ordinary people see it as unfair, guaranteeing legislative seats to commercial interests.

If we lifted our heads to look beyond Hong Kong, we could see a confluence of financial, economic, geopolitical, demographic, cultural, social, religious and environmental stresses of unprecedented magnitude. There are also new

developments on the horizon that offer a new paradigm – concerning knowledge, energy, biotechnology and artificial intelligence. Is the world on the verge of a shift that will define the next phase of the future?

The voices and actions of the 1980s generation may be the prelude to major change in Hong Kong. Commentators and radio talk-show hosts ask who they are and what they stand for. Those who are interviewed talk about the unfairness they see in society and how they feel a sense of civic duty to speak out.

Their emergence should be a message to the fading generation who occupy the seats of political and economic power that they need to communicate differently to a soon-to-be dominant generation. Patronising comments will only

inflammate tempers. Telling them to integrate with the mainstream is also useless.

The 1980s generation will deal with the coming uncertainties in the world possibly better than the current dominant generation. As much as those in power are loath to think about broad trends, it might actually help them to see to the horizon.

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