***The Liberalizing Role of Hong Kong Startups in Religion and Politics[[1]](#footnote-1)***

Lida V. Nedilsky

Individuals gather at an appointed hour in summer of 2019. Each comes equipped for the duration with some prop for the purpose. For the banker joining fellow financiers it’s a smartphone. For the Catholic marching alongside brothers and sisters in Christ it’s a candle. For the medical worker standing in solidarity with nurses and doctors it’s a pair of scrubs. For the schoolkid, one link in a human chain, it’s a surgical mask accessorizing a uniform. For the youth entering the fray it can be a pair of goggles, some plastic wrap, an umbrella or eyepatch, a laser pointer, black t-shirt or hardhat. It can even be the lot. Cameras at the ready document and share. It is the latest vehicle of political expression. At times in celebration, at times in defiance the gathering materializes and disintegrates; moves from place to place; shifts from group to group; hopes to draw others in but cannot be fazed if it spits some out.

Since the territory’s return to Chinese sovereignty more than twenty years ago, Hong Kong’s executive branch has sought ways to control a relatively free-market society. Dispatching riot police to break up flash mobs from June through October 2019 is one vivid example. Acting as a source of consensual politics is another. In this essay I document a rival to control: the persistent presence of both religious and political startups in Hong Kong's organizational marketplace. As vehicles of innovation, startups –those entrepreneurial efforts to respond to missed opportunities by fulfilling demands of an untapped market— ought to attract attention in a city with Hong Kong’s global reputation for business. These are the Christian nongovernmental organizations and political parties that populate its public sphere and dislodge the state-society fixity assumed necessary for stable governance. By placing Christian religious culture in the wider cultural context I cast it in a new light: one that reveals how Christian entrepreneurialism, like political entrepreneurialism, performs a liberalizing role in Hong Kong.

**Corporatism, Startups & Hong Kong Politics**

Corporatism is the political strategy of harnessing private-sector representatives and providers for state efficiency and stability. It is a way of formalizing consensus by deciding who has a voice in politics. Application of corporatism as a framework for understanding Hong Kong politics since its return to Chinese sovereignty 1 July 1997 has not fully exhausted its potential insights. With few exceptions, we ignore what one of corporatism’s earliest proponents and refiners reminds us is essential to the concept's robustness: its emergence from local culture. Howard Wiarda refers to the distinct tradition that sets a corporatist polity apart, unchanged by wider influences and what are often construed as external forces of transformation such as liberalization, democratization or globalization.

In a research note he penned some thirty-five years after publishing his original study that developed the corporative model for the Latin American context, Wiarda reveals the central place of religion as a vehicle of culture in his approach:

I discovered… parallel to Islam in the Middle East or Confucianism in East Asia, that in Latin America there was a whole system of thought, history, culture, religion, and economic and sociopolitical organization "out there" that failed to conform to the Western model. If I still wanted to be a systems analyst, I reasoned, I would have to formulate my own system paradigm. That is what the "corporative model" was all about.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Wiarda’s research focus on Latin America, an area of the world that did not conform to prescribed patterns of modernization, demanded he explain for its distinctive structures visible in both state and society. So he turned to an investigation of Spanish and Portuguese colonial roots to Latin American systems. More specifically, he concentrated on the role of the Catholic Church, including Catholic political theory. As for the definition of corporatism, explains Wiarda, “I wanted to keep it somewhat vague because, with corporatism, I sought to capture a mood, a style, a whole way of thinking and operating –a political culture—rather than any precise institutional arrangement.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

A partial democracy like the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR), legacy of the East Asian territory’s handover from British colonial rule to Chinese sovereignty, still requires assessment of what cultural elements shape state-society relations, and what institutions bridge the divide between state and citizen. Arguably, the requirement is more urgent. Lessons from multicultural citizenship are illuminating for investigations of corporatism because they direct attention to the source of the consensual impulse. The politics behind recognizing distinct interests among a population show that representation rights can be central measures for naming minorities and accommodating diversity in modern states.[[4]](#footnote-4) And in a democracy, such measures introduced by the state are responses to needs; by promising the space for self-definition, these measures exist in stable and morally defensible ways.[[5]](#footnote-5) Hong Kong is less than a full democracy. Its status as a partial democracy, and the SAR government’s terms of cooperation, raise questions regarding the intent as well as implications of state invitation to representation. Any positive response to the state’s bid to work together therefore urges investigation of the new relationship between state and society as the two spheres move closer together. Keep in mind that the flip side of stability is control. Consequently, recognition is not just a mechanism, neutral and efficient. It is an intention that can be judged as sincere or duplicitous.

Hong Kong’s historically shallow relationship of government to governed provides the first clue to skeptical citizens that today’s state-society relationship is structured to capitalize on the control capability of corporative mechanisms. Leading up to the handover, members of the public enjoyed ample room for private initiative to address problems, meet their own and others’ needs, and realize personal as well as collective potential. With the government’s shift to include minority voices in deliberations and integrate them into the formal systems of representation, liberal critics wary of immediate cooptation apply to such efforts the label united front tactics.[[6]](#footnote-6) Citizens frequently articulate caution in Hong Kong when they perceive blurring of the line between public and private, of church and state, of one country and two systems. Likewise, they express growing alarm against a premature, even a preemptive convergence of the Hong Kong SAR and the People’s Republic of China well before the 2047 expiration date for Hong Kong autonomy codified in its Basic Law.

The second clue concerns citizens’ continued initiative: the steady increase and variety across time of organizational actors, what I term startups. Inspired first by an innovative impulse to offer a new process or product in manufacture, startup involves a learning or debugging period for an ultimately efficient system to emerge.[[7]](#footnote-7) Like manufacturing startups, religious and political startups, I suggest, respond to new needs and over-looked demands, begetting a proliferation of options for consumers and interest groups. At the same time, they produce fragmentation as entrepreneurs and consumers alike express dissatisfaction with the available arrangements, processes or products.

Related to this unexpected proliferation of organizational actors is the corporative model’s inability to consolidate independent elements, absorb them into the structure of governance, and thus exercise control by the executive. Put another way, the presence of startups in post-1997 Hong Kong betrays a failure of the government to introduce corporatism consensually and successfully into the local political environment. Unlike startups, corporatism does not appear native to Hong Kong’s political culture. It certainly is not thriving.

**Hong Kong Political Culture**

In advance of Hong Kong’s scheduled return to Chinese sovereignty, both British and Chinese governments took steps to construct new systems of governance in this city of over seven million people. Evaluations of corporatist success in the post-handover period judge institutional arrangements only recently introduced by the governments of China and Hong Kong to bring consensus and harmony into both polities. Yet there is a significant difference between the two cases, despite pressure for the two systems to ultimately converge.[[8]](#footnote-8) Simply put, the direction of convergence stems from opposite starting points. While the central government in Beijing chooses to cut some slack so that the state and party may benefit from a controlled form of private initiative already tested though never fully trusted in the economic realm,[[9]](#footnote-9) the SAR’s executive tries to reel in disparate players in the free marketplace of representative politics by acknowledging certain interest groups and their supposed representatives. Scholarly observers of these institutional arrangements in Hong Kong admit to a failure to thrive.

Introducing weak political parties under partial democratization, argue two local experts, yields shallow and fragile support from a citizenry looking to be led.[[10]](#footnote-10) Parties are stunted and underdeveloped within a system created by Britain and China, external powers sharing an anti-political party bias. Not only can parties claim but limited credit in any legislative success; citizens’ limited role in the democratic process means parties cannot in fact lead people in shared political success, including democratization. Instead, local political elites elected through the two distinct methods of popular geographic and privileged functional constituencies do battle over democratization as a political matter.[[11]](#footnote-11) This system is further weighted by a political heritage of “overriding emphasis on strong but benevolent authority, unity, harmony and the supremacy of the group. It is hostile to the ideas of opposition and the political party.”[[12]](#footnote-12) From this perspective, Hong Kong’s is a political culture fundamentally averse to civic engagement, with both political class and citizenry incapable of leading or being led.

Another problem spells political paralysis if Hong Kong democratizes according to the Basic Law framework depoliticizing the executive in contradistinction to the legislative branch: the proliferation of political parties. “Instead of a stable and institutionalized two-party system that enables a presidential regime to function properly,” writes one scholar, “Hong Kong has a fragmented and uninstitutionalized party system. At the moment there are at least seven or eight parties or quasi-parties represented in the legislature.”[[13]](#footnote-13) In fact, new political parties seem to emerge every year. Consequently, a non-partisan chief executive is permanently deprived of legislative support; at the same time, a multi-party system renders Hong Kong’s Legislative Council highly fragmented.[[14]](#footnote-14)

The corporatist regime is blameworthy for creating a non-cohesive government-business coalition, especially where the business sector is itself pluralistic and unrepresentative. “With no single overriding political organization to represent its diverse interests and to derive a coherent policy package… [a]ll the [business and professional elite] appointees serv[e] in a personal capacity on these committees and bodies, and not really as representatives of interest groups or organizations.”[[15]](#footnote-15) As a result, Hong Kong’s autocratic state, incapable of building a political machine based on party dominance and thus unable to aggregate interests even among likely coalition partners like the business sector, perpetuates fragmentation.[[16]](#footnote-16) Its dalliance with corporatism is clear as neither China’s central government in Beijing nor the executive of the SAR shows itself willing or able to pursue more inclusive incorporation of interest groups, especially the complex work of sharing in decision-making that full democracy represents.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Stepping back far enough to register the presence of ordinary Hong Kong people acting within their familiar, entrepreneurial environment reveals agency over passivity at the same time it directs a long view of political culture.[[18]](#footnote-18) I lend just such perspective to the current debate addressing both civil society and party politics because I see the two connected by a common culture of startups, where innovation and proliferation are normal. In other words, startups are a whole way of thinking and operating in Hong Kong.

**Entrepreneurialism in Religion & NGO Startups**

Until political parties were required for competitive elections to determine Hong Kong’s first popularly elected Legislative Council seats in 1991, on the heels of inaugural selections made by functional constituency and election committee in 1985 and 1988, other, nonelected organizational actors existed to represent and promote various group interests to the colonial government. Among them were trade unionists, what one scholar of the day concluded was the largest movement in Hong Kong capable of coherently representing popular interests.[[19]](#footnote-19) These were rooted in contentious politics of People’s Republic of China versus Republic of China, the Chinese Communist Party versus Kuomintang Party, Hong Kong and Kowloon Federation of Trade Unions versus Hong Kong and Kowloon Trade Unions Council.

At the same time, many small unions populated this universe –unions of fewer than fifty members, but on average about one thousand.[[20]](#footnote-20) It only took seven members to apply for registration of a union, on the one hand; and on the other, proliferation was often fueled by particularistic ties: particular to dialect, ancestral province or village, as well as type of labor and product of manufacture. A rare exception of amalgamation was found in the community, public and social services sector that emerged in the 1960s with the professionalization of service provision replacing charitable efforts by religious and secular volunteers. Thus, during Hong Kong’s peak of industrialization, the working class was hardly united; rather, its members, with external allegiances, were pitted against one another.

Another agent of informal representation was organized religion. Whether in the capacity of charitable organization, educational institution, or medical provider, religion attracted through its services various segments of society and reflected back on them its values in active evangelization. But the idea that a direct association exists between a particular religion and a particular population, and consequently religion’s role in representing and forging distinct minority identities, is misinformed. Not only are there limited instances of lines neatly delineating and binding linguistic, racial, regional, or economic groupings within religious association and service provision in this organizational marketplace, but evidence of consolidation among agglomerations is also limited. An exception may be found among the numerically small Sikh minority, import of British colonialism from the Punjab region of the Indian subcontinent. In contrast, the Muslim community in Hong Kong includes Arabic, Indo-Malay, Mandarin, Turkic and Urdu speakers; Catholic Mass is, for the most part, celebrated in Cantonese and Tagalog; while Protestant worship, in addition to being conducted widely in Cantonese, includes services in Japanese language since the 1920s as well as more recently English for African asylum seekers. Acknowledging people and traditions of Europe and Asia does not express the full variety or vitality of religious life in Hong Kong, a city with an active and transnational evangelical streak.

And of the latter, Christians have arranged the Church in a variety of ways. Some note the creation of two churches: one official, one grassroots. Economic conditions in the 1980s compelled official churches to commit their social service apparatus to the service of the state, compromising their independence; absent similar obligations to the state, grassroots churches instead lent critical voice to political affairs precisely during deliberation of Hong Kong’s future.[[21]](#footnote-21) Add to this the distinction among three substantial organizations of the faithful: the Hong Kong Diocese of the Roman Catholic Church, the mainline Protestant Hong Kong Christian Council, and the evangelical Protestant Hong Kong Chinese Christian Churches Union. Protestants are quick to point out that unlike the Diocese, HKCC and HKCCCU involve voluntary membership and independent voices, and so lack any representational authority over them.[[22]](#footnote-22) And what to make of the countless independent evangelical churches and fellowships in Hong Kong, many with fewer than forty members and without regular clergy? For his part, the Bishop of Hong Kong is the only rightful representative of Catholics in the territory, just as he is in Rome, in the seat of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. But to realize full democracy in Hong Kong, individual Catholics must voice their views directly –“must shout them,” the Bishop adds, “because there’s no other way.”[[23]](#footnote-23) These different notions of membership and representation can be better appreciated through stories of innovation, individual interest and proliferation –the stuff of startups.

***Story 1: Innovation***

*A retired NGO founder and ordained minister shared through his private newsletter dated 6 August 2018 the story of two young nurses from different hospitals who sought him during periods of medical testing he had to endure. Each nurse approached the longsuffering patient distraught at finding herself questioning whether the Church’s message was meaningful. Each struggled for a reason to stay in her church when its practices and teachings seemed irrelevant. One came having read a publication he had written three years before. “The fact is that most of us know about and often talk about [this distress]. The question is: do we have the audacity to start to do something to right this wrong?” asked the religious entrepreneur of his readership in response.* *His own example of innovation would have to be carried on by others. The need was still apparent. But what of the impulse?*

In Hong Kong, religious entrepreneurs abound. Entrepreneurs are not only evangelists, for whom Jesus is the answer to all distress. They are also internal critics of the Church, for whom religious leadership and messaging are often cause for distress. Circulating among Hong Kong’s Christian population they offer choices attractive to those individuals, especially recent converts, seeking alignment with their old lives and their new faith. Themselves demanding alternative forms of religious engagement as ways to reduce dissonance and expand expression of faith in Christ, these entrepreneurs deliver a package of spiritual goods through startup of the nongovernmental organization (NGO). Whether begun by an ordained minister, trained theologian, or leading laity as combination of reform agenda and personal challenge, today’s faith-based NGOs represent an innovation in the tradition of the Catholic order, Protestant sect, covenant, base community, and seekers church. They are a way for like-minded others to connect, eventually widening the scope and extending the timeframe for being Christian. With a staff of fulltime, spiritually motivated workers, NGO leaders guide the production of new product lines reflective of the Information Age. Written, spoken, and performed materials include books, sermons, songs, coursework, kits, retreats, forums, and public demonstrations.

NGOs and the individuals responsible for their existence connect with their clients not through particularistic ties but via social networks cobbled together by priests, professors, students, seminarians, social workers and coworkers. In meeting the faithful’s demands for the skills and knowledge to assess religious growth and maturity, faith-based NGOs alter the religious commitments of leaders, staff, and participants alike. They even work to alter the Christian’s self-definition to be a Christian of social concern. As one NGO founder and secondary school teacher explained his impulse to startup with fellow students before graduating from university, “[I]f we still wanted to fulfill our holistic faith [after joining society], why separate? So we agreed we needed to have an organization. That would give each of us the necessary momentum. And a group effort gives group momentum to fulfill that [social concern] mission and vision.”[[24]](#footnote-24) Voluntary association, like this NGO startup of 1987 conceived by peers anticipating the challenges to Christian faith posed by adulthood, pulls people together rather than leaves them to solitary struggle. And when events like the Tiananmen Square Incident of 1989 challenge their faith in a Chinese democratic future, these Christians have a ready vehicle for political struggle.

There is political significance to the NGO label, connoting popular agency unthinkable in societies like China’s built on the submission of groups coupled with the controlling tendencies of state. The NGO as an entity outside the government’s purview signals a political culture based on voluntary, even self-made association in contrast to the mass organization, a mere extension of government. It is also distinct from particularistic ties, as believers experience a Christian convert’s faith beyond family tradition, beyond region of origin, even beyond ethnicity. In turn, they are encouraged to express universalizing social concern. The NGO, rather than the state, thus produces in them a wider societal orientation.

NGOs respond to and articulate emerging concerns including religious tolerance, environmental stewardship, urban re-development, immigrant labor, sexual rights, direct elections, and territorial self-determination. Referring to themselves as civil society organizations underscores a guiding assumption working in NGOs: they exist in an effort to generate fellowship and education, equip people with skills and information, create situations of role play and empathy so that more individuals can, in the words of the retired NGO founder and ordained minister quoted above, “do something to right this wrong.” Members actively strengthen threads of innovation as these religious startups mobilize them to educate church members about upcoming elections, partner with schools across the territory to produce civic education curriculum, encourage secondary school students to orchestrate political actions and form their own groups, represent religious minorities in the election committee, and run for election themselves as former leaders of religious organizations turned politicians.

***Story 2: Individual Interest***

*Not unused to the game of representing Christian interests, the Hong Kong Christian Council (HKCC) was tasked by the new government with designating voters to an election committee judging candidates competing for chief executive of the SAR. Although individual Christians were involved in Basic Law consultations during the mid-1980s –floating ideas generally and offering opinions specifically on methods for determining the chief executive— they never sought recognition ala the politics of multiculturalism. When recognition was bestowed upon HKCC four months after the July 1st handover of 1997, it faced criticism by its own people: that the election committee was undemocratic, that HKCC should not be singled out for representational authority when the organization did not represent the Protestant community, and that the Protestant community lacked any internal mechanism to handle the election of representatives*. *Yet the legacy of independent religious institutions from the colonial era shaped HKCC’s terms of participation, highlighting the centrality of individualism within Protestantism.*

What happens when independent initiative in the form of a faith-based NGO gets drawn into a corporatist arrangement like the election committee? Closer inspection of one startup’s experience with amalgamation reveals the cultural significance of voluntary initiative in any cooperative effort: respect for individual members’ independence. Mainline, Chinese-speaking Protestants like the Salvation Army, Anglicans, Baptists, and Presbyterians established the Hong Kong Christian Council in 1952 as an interdenominational, umbrella organization. But the council also included members with roots in German- and English-speaking Protestantism like the Lutherans and Methodists. Later a founding member of the Colloquium of the Six Religious Leaders formalized in 1978, HKCC brought together Chinese-speaking Protestants, Catholics, Buddhists, Taoists, Muslims and Confucianists. Each was a step in voluntary, consensual, and common work. Social engagement preceded civil sharing of theology. Then, civil sharing within the group was succeeded by annual, New Year’s issuance of a common statement in local newspapers about Hong Kong social issues.

Members of the Colloquium, like those of the Hong Kong Christian Council itself, concede they are not representative. Individual churches or temples or individual people are not bound by the decisions of any representative. At the same time, Colloquium leaders are unable to speak for individual electors. Admittedly, they are unaware of individual members or electors’ decisions to participate or not participate in committee votes. It was the Provisional Legislature that charged individuals already practiced in representing their distinct worldviews to one another to represent them to a wider public. The election committee, as one Muslim community leader put it simply, “Wasn’t around ten years ago; won’t be in fifty!”[[25]](#footnote-25) The actual work of the election committee, consequently, is about figuring out what it means to represent a religious minority more so than representing interests of community members to the government. While institutional leaders grow sensitive to community boundaries as they produce systems of representation, they become aware, at the same time, of their own limitations and arbitrariness of efforts at representation.

The Protestant HKCC’s initial approach to the task of representation was to orchestrate direct election of seven electors to the election committee. This method served as an example of Protestant independent-mindedness. Direct election promised neither corporate action nor public accountability; instead, it enabled an individual Christian with the freedom to follow his or her conscience as an elector. Implicit in this approach was being accountable to God rather than to an electorate. But that only stiffened the challenge with representation: how to resolve the disparate –in other words non-corporatist—tendencies of voluntary association, of diversity, of geographic as well as organizational dispersal, and of respect for the individual? All six religions invited to participate in formal, representational politics had to deal with this common problem among individuals in community: the tension between individual interest and collective will or social responsibility. HKCC alone attempted a small circle election of Protestants, only to find that democracy places the occasional churchgoer or ambitious businessman on par with the dedicated pastor.

That Hong Kong as a special administrative region of China has room yet for minorities to negotiate their unique selves suggests an institutional virtue. Hong Kong minorities are meeting the challenge of defining themselves through the tools they have in hand, such as respect for individualism, and not just the tools offered by the state. It does not stop at the example of the Protestant response to the election committee. Challenge to corporatism is apparent in the case of Civic Act-up, just one example bridging the worlds of Christian NGO with secular political party.[[26]](#footnote-26) NGOs populate civil society; they direct bodies into the public square. Yet they also reveal how some must leave the square to make room for others, as with our retired minister or the more youthful Nathan Law, who resigned as chair of the political party Demosistō in May 2018.[[27]](#footnote-27) Respecting individual interest, they demonstrate how physical movement and organizational turnover can be expressions of commitment as people look for the right way to express personal faithfulness.

**Entrepreneurialism in Politics & Party Startups**

As with religious organizations**,** political organizations including but not limited to political parties are also a realm of startups. Where in the early 1990s three or four core parties vied for votes, by the 2000s the number of mainstay parties had doubled, with numbers continuing to rise steeply. Especially after the Umbrella Movement of 2014 we see a precipitous rise, so that by 2016 some twenty parties and electoral alliances became involved in the Legislative Council (LegCo) and local District Council elections.

Hong Kong’s parties do not simply form as a repackaging of existing parties or their multiplication as offshoots. They represent both new ideas entering mainstream political conversation and new political entrepreneurs joining to reshape the act of representation. Political camps can be identified as pro-Beijing versus pro-Democracy, or grass-roots socialist versus pro-business capitalist, or conservative versus liberal versus localist. Yet the reasons for the variety within a camp –for example, DAB (1992) and Liberal Party (1993) and New People’s Party (2011); Democratic Party (1994) and The Frontier (1996) and Labour Party (2011) and Demosistō (2016); Youngspiration (2015) and Demosistō (2016) and Hong Kong National Party (2016)— suggest distinct agendas and positions that discourage consolidation into a single party or even permanence of a particular camp.

As early as 30 June 1997, the eve of Hong Kong’s return to Chinese sovereignty, the Democratic Party insisted on occupying its own space outside the LegCo building to distinguish itself from other pro-democracy parties like The Frontier that joined with a wide variety of civil society organizations in marking the historic occasion ending British colonial rule. Some say they did this to leave open the door for negotiating with officials of the territory’s new sovereign. The Democratic Party would do so again in 2010, after distancing itself from the more oppositional voices among Hong Kong’s prodemocracy political parties in LegCo struggling to ensure the introduction of open and direct elections. Others see the decision to stake out a separate space as means to guarantee freedom of expression and pluralism of experience within civil society; the handover was for many something other than an occasion to celebrate. We see this again in 2014 with Occupy Central, Scholarism, and other, less organized eruptions of protest that all fall under the Umbrella Movement. Separate camps and activities centered around Admiralty versus Mong Kok, Hong Kong Island versus Kowloon Peninsula, distinguishing between middle class versus working class.

Some Hong Kong scholars think that the entrenching rather than surmounting of differences that political proliferation in a system of partial democratization begets benefits the parties in their narrow political ambitions. Direct elections served as the breeding ground for the likes of Hong Kong’s Democratic Party and The Frontier (until their merger in 2008). They consistently won significant portions of the popular vote cast by middle class political optimists hoping to effect change in the overall system: “Since people do not see parties as powerful political actors, they set even greater store by the integrity, courage, steadfastness and reliability of the party politicians… Consequently, style and image rather than substance and achievements are better vote-winners in Hong Kong's political context.”[[28]](#footnote-28) That political context is Hong Kong’s transition from British to Chinese sovereignty. It directs more than one generation of parties not on policy work but on issues of ideological contestation.[[29]](#footnote-29)

***Story 3: Proliferation***

*Take the case of the young men whose political startup, Demosist*ō*, suffered recent setbacks with their disqualification, resignation, and imprisonment. Revisiting the past few years shows that before founding a successful contender for votes, Joshua Wong, Nathan Law, and Albert Chow organized a successful campaign in 2012 to thwart the SAR government’s plan to introduce nationalist education into the territory’s primary and secondary school curriculum with the text, The China Model. "We don't want the next generation of Hong Kong people to be brainwashed," CNN quoted Joshua Wong as saying.[[30]](#footnote-30) At age fifteen, Wong convened Scholarism, a group of secondary school students that helped organize a ten-day protest campaign alongside* *the National Education Parents Concern Group and the Professional Teachers' Union. Together with parents, teachers, and other concerned citizen groups they pressed Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying to call off compulsory lessons. Their work would not end there.*

Even when too young to vote, ordinary Hong Kong citizens –not political or administrative elites from the civil service[[31]](#footnote-31)— actively contribute to the formation of political parties. As with the Christian NGO, they combine innovation that comes from seeing unfulfilled demand with a fierce sense of disappointment in current offerings. And like the Christian NGO, these new parties liberate the individual to achieve on behalf of society. In 2014, at age seventeen, Joshua Wong explained his particular view on education: “When the average student thinks of how to study or plan their career for the future, students of Scholarism think about what Hong Kong’s future should be like.”[[32]](#footnote-32) Formed as a discussion group for considering the news of the day, Scholarism poised itself to consider the issue of patriotic education once the SAR executive communicated its agenda.

Not that everyone should follow Joshua Wong’s specific example or his general life journey, but the basic path toward innovation is a discernable one in Hong Kong. “At school, the teachers told us: [Hong Kong](https://www.theguardian.com/world/hong-kong) people are economic animals, focused on investment and the stock market,” Wong told one British journalist. “There was a sense that business development was the most important thing.”[[33]](#footnote-33) Wong did not fit the exact mold of an economic animal. “I’m a Christian,” he went on to explain, “and my motivation for joining activism is that I think we should be [the Earth’s] salt and light… [A]t least it prove[s] that activism is not just related to experienced politicians or well-trained activists who have been working for NGOs; it can also be students and high-schoolers.“[[34]](#footnote-34) Likewise, as Scholarism joined the Occupy Central protest of 2014, the group would not simply submit to the rules and plans of Occupy’s original architects. Witness the geographic split of the political stage harkening back to the LegCo building on 30 June 1997: Admirality for the old guard versus Mong Kok for the youth.

Before setting up Demosistō, an alternative model for representation in running a geographic constituency, Wong, Law and Chow as high school age youngsters under the banner of Scholarism offered an alternative and unrepresented voice to personally impactful debates in the public sphere. Taken from Demosistō’s policy pages is the foundation for their vision: “The community believes that the essence of Hong Kong's education lies in cultivating the next generation to become a citizen with a sense of subjectivity, rather than obedient of authority.”[[35]](#footnote-35) And even before openly confronting Hong Kong authorities of law and order in the 2014 Umbrella Movement and becoming Hong Kong’s first political prisoners they expressed caution towards the authorities of government, of church, and of mainstream media in Hong Kong.

Neither a registered, limited corporation nor a registered society, Demosistō depends on individual membership, funding, and liability. Demosistō positions its party platform within the one country, two systems framework not only with respect to the promise offered by that framework –that after its return to Chinese sovereignty in 1997 Hong Kong is to enjoy autonomy founded on its own system of governance—but also with respect to the timeframe of fifty years. Having in summer 2019 observed its twenty-second anniversary as a special administrative region of China, Hong Kong has but an additional twenty-eight years to sort itself out. The clock is ticking.

Aware of its time constraints, Demosistō advocates building up a culture of party work based on the principle of popular and ongoing activism. This activism encourages politicians as well as party supporters in generating agendas through interaction with the party website as well as their use of social media to communicate opinions and proposals directly to government committees. It urges willing members to build their knowledge and ensure Hong Kong remains the standard for future policies by researching and archiving Hong Kong history. This activism fosters political representation based on a feedback loop not of polls but of personal appeals. This activism relies on a treasure trove not of financial contributions but of private contemplations and public demonstrations.

**The Liberalizing Rationale & Role of Startups**

Investigation of Hong Kong’s political culture has shifted in the territory’s post-handover period to focus on the implications of its convergence with China. Corporatist analyses emphasize strategies by the executive branch of the SAR and CCP central government to bring harmony to Hong Kong politics. Both cases reveal a dalliance with corporatist mechanisms of control. There is, however, a significant difference between the cases. The government in Beijing, accustomed to control, cuts slack so that state and party both may benefit from measured private initiative. In Hong Kong, where the free marketplace reigns, the government does what it can to pull public players into representative politics.

In either case, the product of such corporatist mechanisms is meant to be consensual political culture. In the People’s Republic of China, the pursuit of consensual political culture since before the state’s founding in 1949 has been associated with united front tactics, a soft power approach used to forge pragmatic alliances, yet one that could be harnessed for class struggle orchestrated through campaigns to eradicate enemies of the state. In this situation, pluralism is legitimated and controlled in close quarters: the state tolerates, as it recognizes through both its sponsorship and demands, the existence of different interest groups outside the acceptable elements making up the Chinese Communist Party. What about the situation in Hong Kong? What accounts for its arrangement?

If sticking to the terms of a typical debate about corporatism, we must also attend to corporatism’s conceptual alternative, pluralism. Hong Kong’s political culture is not based on the same dynamic structure as China’s, where the poles of pluralism and consensus are marked by close proximity, and with volatile shifts between the two. The poles of Hong Kong pluralism and consensus are wide apart and fundamentally decentralized, highlighting the competitive and fractured nature of political debate in the Hong Kong SAR that comes from independent agency in political culture. Existing practices of initiative peculiar to Hong Kong ground this difference in the local.

Startups by their very existence demonstrate the potential for independent initiative already structured into society. In Hong Kong, the justification for such potential is rooted in an economic model imposed by Great Britain. By its most basic principle of supply and demand, free market capitalism invites such initiative from private citizens. While modified by human realities, this pure capitalism is widely recognized in and associated with Hong Kong. But the wider functioning of such market principles in other areas of life such as religion, education, social service provision and healthcare, has received less attention. Market principles of competition inspired by profit motive might not apply literally to religion. Yet the competitive, private initiative aspect of a religious marketplace certainly does: supplying where there is demand, and thus profiting from manufacture of influence reflecting the glory of God.

That liberal initiative has everything to do with Hong Kong’s dynamic and varied religious marketplace. Whether places of worship or schools or hospitals or clinics or Bible camps or publishing houses, the presence and proliferation of faith-based service providers in Hong Kong is a direct consequence of individual initiative by not just the inspired but the dissatisfied. People with distinct, chosen, self-made educational and professional paths startup after recognizing a lack in the current offerings. They startup a political party or an NGO or a church, moreover, having already learned the skill of starting up. And such skills as are necessary for starting up anything are learned in trusted, funded, enabled institutions all across Hong Kong public life that entrust Hong Kongers to start something up.

In this summer of protests individual Demosistō members have joined the flash mob, its fluid form familiar and democratic. “’There is a variety of opinions and different people thinking of different strategies,’ says Isaac Cheng, a protester who is also vice chairman of the pro-democracy party Demosistō. ‘Each person participating in the crowd can express their opinions and change the movement’ by making a persuasive case.”[[36]](#footnote-36) Members have also reached back to their original base of support, expressing their belief that even those too young to vote contribute to Hong Kong democracy.

In mid-August of 2019, Joshua Wong, now twenty-two, announced that Hong Kong secondary students had participated in a survey by Demosistō in collaboration with two student organizations assessing support for the pro-democracy protests. Of some twenty thousand teenagers polled, eighty-nine percent agreed with protesters’ demands, with almost half expressing intention to boycott classes every Monday of the new schoolyear (among other strategies) until those demands have been met. In response, the Professional Teachers’ Union officially concurred with a planned student boycott, its president calling it a reasonable method for articulating demands.[[37]](#footnote-37) And on September 2nd, the first day of class, alumni joined hands with students in making human chains. Scholarism gave way to Demosistō. Civil society moved from blocking a textbook for national education to embracing the citizenship of Hong Kong youngsters.

**Conclusion**

In contrast to negative liberty, which refers to the happenstance condition whereby the individual enjoys an absence of constraints on private action, the positive sense of liberty, Isaiah Berlin explains in his essay, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” derives from the wish on the part of the individual to be his own master.

I wish my life and my decisions to depend on myself, not on external forces of whatever kind. I wish to be the instrument of my own, not of other men’s, acts of will. I wish to be a subject, not an object; to be moved by reasons, by conscious purposes, which are my own, not by causes which affect me, as it were, from outside. I wish to be somebody, not nobody; a doer –deciding, not being decided for, self-directed and not acted upon by external nature or by other men as if I were a thing, or an animal, or a slave incapable of playing a human role, that is, of conceiving goals and policies of my own and realizing them.[[38]](#footnote-38)

Such words could easily come from the lips of Joshua Wong or the writings of our retired minister. They could also be expressed in a publication by university peers who founded their own organization or the justification of an election committee member from a religious constituency. Such ideas stand in stark contrast to ruling expectations. While Hong Kong and China are coming at it from different directions, each one’s citizenry is pressed to accept corporatist mechanisms for the sake of stability and prosperity. For Hong Kong’s rulers, the impulse toward managing stems from confrontation with a much deeper force: the drive to startup.

The future of Hong Kong startups, with their marked imprint on Hong Kong society, depends not only on the extent to which autonomy is respected, but the degree to which individuals are entrusted with entrepreneurialism. “Are there any possibilities for the emergence of leaders with new integrative public visions on the Chinese scene?” asks sociologist Richard Madsen concerning civil society and China. Madsen takes inspiration from ethicist Tu Wei-ming’s articulation of cultural China, a stretched out and sweeping community of common awareness uniting Chinese wherever they are found. Yet, by pulling well beyond the usual association of China with the mainland and its government, Madsen shifts the spotlight from the center onto the periphery. “The most vital parts of cultural China are those beyond the borders of the PRC. It is there [in Taibei, Hong Kong, Singapore, San Francisco, New York and Paris, as well as in Beijing] perhaps that unitive new stories about the meaning of Chinese history may begin to be told.”[[39]](#footnote-39) Not in China, but in Hong Kong, perhaps, the unitive story will be told.

Hong Kong’s distinct story should come as no surprise. Already we discern a shift from negative to positive liberty in Hong Kong culture’s development to its contemporary form. Already economically open, socially open, normatively open, Hong Kong society now faces an administrative regime that does only what it can to create a semblance of control in a culture of startups, of private initiative. That culture “to start to do something” to right a wrong appears entrenched. Among the young especially, the risk to startup comes easily –whether with the permission of the state or without it– as the events of summer 2019 attest. The leaderless protesters call to secure the line separating the two systems. What began as a campaign for full withdrawal of an extradition bill with the mainland is once more a demand for full democracy through universal suffrage: one person, one vote. Without the space “to start to do something,” where will the young channel that energy for self-determination?

On 4 September 2019 Chief Executive Carrie Lam resolved to formally withdraw the extradition bill from legislative debate when LegCo reconvenes in October. She hopes to refocus energy on the economic marketplace. But that marketplace has never been the exclusive domain of Hong Kong startups.

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