PROTESTS IN HONG KONG (2019)

ANONYMITY IN JIANGHU: HONG KONG'S URBAN SPACE IN TIMES OF CRISIS

ESTHER LORENZ

The storming of the Legislative Council in Hong Kong by a group of local activists on July 1, 2019 marked a turn of events in what was until then the largest ever series of political demonstrations in the semi-autonomous Chinese territory. In the months that followed, Hong Kong was shaken by violence and unrest unseen since the riots in the 1960s against the British Colonial rule. The emergence of these scenes of total chaos in a city where safety and efficiency of shared urban space and infrastructure are enormously valued and sustained at highest levels effectively generated a fundamental sense of destabilization. This article introduces an ancient Chinese cultural notion, *jianghu*, with the aim of contributing to an enriched and differentiated cultural understanding of these events and the transformation of urban space they effected.

The first part introduces *jianghu* in contrast to the dichotomy of the public and the private so deeply rooted in Western civilization. The comparison is not so much about suggesting *jianghu* as a substitute concept to replace existing interpretations entirely, but an attempt and an invitation to open new perspectives of understanding of a place that is the hybrid result of a complexity of cultural influences and unique historical and political circumstances. The section that follows outlines an image of Hong Kong as a city during times of peace, as well as a very brief account of its political history, to provide the background for the subsequent description and interpretation of a Hong Kong shaken by protests as a contemporary form of *jianghu*. The last portion of the essay describes the actions within and the transformation of urban spaces during the violent

protests in Hong Kong between July and November 2019 to illustrate the congruence between characteristics of *jianghu* as known from Chinese film and literature and the events that deeply unsettled the Hong Kong territory.

THE PRIVATE AND THE PUBLIC

The question of public space from a Western perspective is grounded in the dichotomy of public and private inherent in an understanding of the city that is deeply rooted in the Greek *polis*. While the existence of and stability of the family is a precondition for a productive engagement in public life in the ancient city-state, the duality between the two realms is distinct. Aristotle speaks about two lives that exist in parallel.[1] As Hannah Arendt points out, Greek society maintains a sharp distinction between the home and the family on the one hand—dedicated to a life grounded in biological association and characterized by command—and political organization on the other—negotiated through the process of persuasion.[2]

In Chinese culture, grown from its own ancient roots, this sharp distinction between public and private has never taken place. The family, like in the Greek *polis*, is at the beginning of society, and in Chinese culture it is also at its core. Rather than forming a parallel realm, socio-political structures grow in expansion from the notion of the family and the home, and are deeply rooted in Confucianist thought. They establish a societal and spatial framework distinctly different from that in the West that Li Shiqiao identifies as "degrees of care."[3]

This resonates with the conception of *tianxia*, a term that dates back to philosophical writings from the Zhou period and that maintained a steady influence throughout China's history. It literally translates as "all under heaven" and denotes a normative "world" that can be understood as the largest existing form of the family, deeply imbued with Confucian values of morality and hierarchy. Zhao Tingyang discusses the "isomorphism between family and *tianxia*" during the Zhou dynasty that ties together a political order of *tianxia* providing protection for each family with an ethical order that extends "family relationality into the tianxia institutional order."[4] *Tianxia* establishes a hierarchy grounded in morality and power and acted out by paying tributes, which correspond to giving respect to parents and ancestors within a family. Zhao points out the all-inclusiveness of tianxia as its fundamental characteristic that leads to a conception of an interiorization of the entire world with "no outside."[5]

Yet, there are gaps that emerge between the extended circles of familial care, and there are limits to their capacity to be all-encompassing. There are positions of rejection and projections of alternative worlds. There are individuals who deliberately withdraw themselves from the hierarchical,

established order, acting upon a variety of motives. In fiction and in reality this realm outside the normative order is known as *jianghu*.

JIANGHU – AN EXTERNAL REALM OF NON-STRUCTURED ACTION

Jianghu is a Chinese cultural concept that literally translates as "rivers and lakes." The term can be traced back to the Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi. In his writings the term denotes a life freed from officialdom, career aspirations and family ties. He uses "rivers and lakes" synonymously with the Way, the *Tao*, the natural realm for man and his thinking that is characterized by purposelessness and detachment.[6] Zhuang Zi's writings in a political sense promote non-hierarchical, dynamic organization of human life.[7]

Over time the term has developed a rich spectrum of meaning both through fiction as well as through history. The aspect that remains constant between the evolving uses and interpretations of this concept is that *jianghu* establishes a position outside regulated systems, from which these can be reflected on, opposed, and overturned. This logic appears as a frequent feature in the narratives of Chinese martial arts tales and movies, commonly described as *wuxia*. The most influential tale to date to describe the realm of *jianghu* in relation to *wuxia* is the novel *Outlaws of the Marsh or Water Margin* (水滸傳, by Shi Nai'an, 14th century), situated in the period of the Song Dynasty (960-1279). The book tells the story of 108 rebels who, frustrated by the political environment and the living conditions at that time, "became leaders of an outlaw army of thousands and fought brave and resourceful battles against pompous, heartless tyrants."[8] The protagonists withdraw from their everyday lives and hide in the marshes of Liangshan in Shandong province to prepare for and to conduct the fight for justice against the corrupt ruling order. While regular society is hierarchical and highly structured, *jianghu* does not have structure, it relies on alliances

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and honor codes that are fluid and subject to change.

As the conceptual dwelling place for itinerant performers, healers, swordsmen, beggars, and outlaws both in real life as well as in fiction, *jianghu* forms the antithesis to home and the family. In martial arts tales, *jianghu* is frequently treated as a realm that one can enter, but also again leave, to return to home and family. It is distinct from *shanlin*, "mountains and forests," the retreat for Daoist monks and hermits. While *shanlin* is a place for non-action and spiritual contemplation, *jianghu* is characterized by action that is committed to effecting change in society.[9]

In contemporary contexts, *jianghu* appears in academic discussions on the arts and the digital as a potential new realm that enables evasion of government control and censorship. But *jianghu* is different from Habermas' public sphere, where society can openly debate issues of common concern. It is in fact a space external to societal structures and conventions, from which counter concepts can be envisioned, and battles against oppressive, corrupt, or unjust authorities can be fought.

Jianghu may denote the retreat from a regulated life, opposition to government in the fight for justice, lawlessness, or personal freedom; it signifies both a mental state and a space. While consistently implying some form of rejection of a status quo, it has remained vague and malleable in its interpretation, and in relation to specific socio-political conditions of any given era.

GOVERNMENTAL CARE AS THE NORMATIVE HONG KONG

Hong Kong is a city with an extremely high population and building density. The spatial compression produces a three-dimensional urban fabric of short distances. In conjunction with a highly efficient public transportation infrastructure, the city is primarily navigated on foot, only 7.6% of the population own a private vehicle.[10] Due to this prevalence of pedestrianism, Hong Kong's population density is directly reflected in the mass of moving bodies that traverse the city through this three-dimensional pedestrian network. These spaces are not made for pause, contemplation or flânerie, they are spaces of flow designed to provide the most convenient, smooth, and rapid connections between places of living, work, education, and leisure. This priority is also reflected in the organization of the spaces themselves—surface markings on the floor and overhead signals, reminiscent of highway guidance systems, control the use of lanes and direction of flows, turnstiles and rail guards manage access and zoning, elevated walkways and metal barriers provide clear separation between pedestrian and vehicle space.

Life in Hong Kong is characterized by an enormous dedication to maintaining the constancy, safety, and efficiency of this flow through a high

degree of management exerted by the government. While these spatial parameters and approach to governing are symptomatic of the needs of a city of a material and human density as extreme as in Hong Kong, conversely, the unique morphology and tight organization of the city must be recognized as the result of an underlying sociocultural framework that enables its formation and sustains its vitality. If seen through a Chinese cultural perspective, according to Li Shiqiao, the approach of the Hong Kong government may need to be understood as one of all-encompassing care,[11] including the provision of open spaces and leisure facilities that are accessible to all, but that do not inherently constitute public space in a political sense. The level of care by the government in maintaining order is matched by a high level of compliance from its citizens. The cultural basis for this general tolerance of guidance, rules, and restrictions in Hong Kong's population is often explained through notions of Confucianism, which resonates with the understanding of the city as nested scales of familial care that also implies loyalty and respect toward government. Hong Kong ranks among the safest cities in the world.[12] For the average citizen violence is an extrinsic phenomenon. During normal, peaceful times, space, management and conformity are tight, and seem not to leave gaps outside the realm of governmental care, with few exceptions. In Hong Kong, highways, roads, and scarce instances of vacant or abandoned land, dangerous and unfit for bodily occupation, can be understood as spatial manifestations of *jianghu*, while triad operations embody the social manifestation of "rivers and lakes," as the world of "bandits" that runs in parallel and exists hidden from and outside the realm of the established order. For most Hong Kong citizens *jianghu* does not touch upon their everyday lives but exists in a world of literary and cinematic fiction.

In contrast to this perception of stability and largely friction-free everyday collective life in the city

of Hong Kong there lies an inner struggle, which is rooted in the precarious political situation that is fundamental to Hong Kong's existence—first as a British Colony following the Opium Wars, and since the handover of the territory to China in 1997, as a "Special Administrative Region" of the People's Republic of China, operating under the motto of "one country, two systems." The identity of Hong Kong people, who are largely comprised of immigrants from Mainland China and their descendants—92% of Hong Kong's population are ethnically Chinese—has developed its own characteristics overtime, with a self-conception distinctly different from the mainland, and at the same time deeply rooted in Chinese culture given their ancestral heritage. For many of these immigrants, their transition to Hong Kong can be interpreted as constituting various forms of "entering *jianghu*" in relation to Mainland China, either as a realm "outside" allowing for alternative lifestyles and opportunities or as a place to evade the control of the Central Government.

While Hong Kong had been open to Western ideas and influences since the incremental ceding of the territory to the British, starting in 1842, throughout its time as a colony it had been ruled by a governor who was directly appointed by the British monarch. The governing efforts of the British colonial rule prioritized the maintenance of stability conducive to the flourishing of trade and commerce. Absent of substantial provisions of democratic institutions and processes, a public sphere in the sense of Jürgen Habermas had not been established by the time of the handover in 1997.[13]

The ambiguity of the Basic Law with regard to instituting universal suffrage, in combination with the stipulation that the Chief Executive is to be appointed by the Central Government based on a selection "through election or through consultations," present provisions perhaps less committed than what contemporary supporters of democracy sometimes refer to as "promises."[14] Moreover, the impending end of the 50-year period of Hong Kong's semi-autonomy in 2047 constitutes a looming threat that is virtually inescapable. This is exacerbated by instances of attempted introductions of new laws that seem to threaten both Hong Kong's identity and stipulated level of independence. To Hong Kong's citizens these appear as premature steps of the realization of Hong Kong's full absorption into China—whatever this final scenario may look like in the future—which are feared to violate the provision in the basic law that the "The socialist system and policies shall not be practiced in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, and the previous capitalist system and way of life shall remain unchanged for 50 years."[15] In the past these incidents triggered otherwise rare political demonstrations in Hong Kong,

such as the protests in 2003 against a new national security law, and the demonstrations against the introduction of a curriculum of "moral and national education" in Hong Kong's education system in 2012.[16]

The proposition of a new extradition law in 2019 that would allow criminal suspects to be surrendered to China for trial not only triggered vehement rejection by the Hong Kong people, but it also sparked more violent and sustained forms of activism, unseen in the territory for over half a century, and unprecedented in some of their characteristics and ways of utilizing and transforming the spaces of the city. Given Hong Kong's political and cultural hybridity, we need differentiated perspectives to think with and through the events that took place in this unique territory.

HONG KONG'S SPACE OF CRISIS AS JIANGHU

The protests against the extradition law in 2019 are to date considered the largest political demonstrations that have ever taken place in Hong Kong, culminating in up to two million citizens—more than a quarter of the territory's population—gathering in the streets on June 16, 2019.[17] They came out in opposition to the proposed bill, and in protest against the Chief Executive Carrie Lam's decision two days earlier to only suspend rather than drop the bill.[18]

The week before, on June 12, a smaller demonstration in front of the government offices turned violent when protesters threw bricks and metal rods at the police, who in return responded with the use of batons, pepper spray and tear gas.[19] In a response on the same day, Lam expressed her disapproval of the incident and reiterated her rejection of the demonstrators' demands through familial metaphors: "If I let him have his way every time my son acts this way, I believe we will have a good relationship in the short term. But if

I indulge his wayward behaviour, he might regret it after he grows up."[20] This statement is revealing of the government's self-conceived parental role towards its citizens. In any case it did not resonate well with Hong Kong's youth. The accumulative effect of the reactions by the government in the early summer of 2019 such as this one may in fact have unleashed deep-seated disappointment and desperation in Hong Kong's young generation, who felt increasingly not taken care of at all. These sentiments would certainly be grounded in the fear of their cultural identity, values, and way of life being jeopardized by the impending end of the "one country two systems" stipulation well during their lifetime. These emotions may have additionally been exacerbated by the progressive vanishing of perspectives in a Hong Kong characterized by an ever-expanding wealth gap in its population, driven by an extreme combination of land policy and capitalist real estate practices that go all the way back to British colonial rule.

On July 1, 2019, the anniversary of Hong Kong's handover to China, a group of activists broke into the Legislative Council building, smashed the façade and vandalized the interior, sprayed over the flag of Hong Kong in the Council chamber, and—strangely enough—raised the British Colonial flag in its stead. This sudden shift to violence marked "an irreversible step toward escalation"[21] and a clear crystallization of two very distinct groups of protesters: The first group represented the large majority of those demonstrating peacefully and within the boundaries authorized for the rallies. While they did express their support for democratic values, they raised their voices specifically against the extradition law. After the announcement of its suspension, despite lingering disappointment with this incomplete concession, these large demonstrations came to an end. The anger and dissatisfaction of the second group—comprised of several disparate fractions of predominantly young people—did not dissipate. In contrary, they grew even stronger. These protesters turned to active aggression to provoke a strong response from the government. They expanded their demands—which functioned less as an agenda for political negotiation than as a declaration of the government's failings—to a total of five with remarkably varying political weight, ranging from universal suffrage to elect the Legislative Council and the Chief Executive to amnesty for themselves irrespective of the nature of their actions.

The distinction between these two types of demonstrators is relevant for the discussion at hand. The first group, while expressing disagreement and staging dramatic scenes of the city's tight spaces packed with people, acted in full compliance with the rules and within behavioral conventions. In contrast, the moment of storming the Legislative Council building and the sudden shift to violence of the second group, I argue, can be understood

as an act of self-withdrawal by the activists from the familial care of the Hong Kong government and from the order of its societal structure, triggered by the sense of abandonment described above. It marks their entry into the realm of *jianghu*. This explanation is supported by the radical change in the behavior of these activists: the occupation of spaces not designed for sojourn, general conduct opposing governmental and societal norms, the remaining in a tenacious position of opposition throughout the government's various attempts to open a dialogue, the active use of violence, the wilful embracing of danger, and the blurring of identities. On the surface these manifestations may not appear any different from political activism and unrest in other places, however, in Hong Kong more than anywhere else, these stand in stark contradiction to the territory's normative way of life, and importantly, to the young activists' own disciplined conforming to these prior to the crisis: "They were becoming something different from what they were, a metamorphosis that would have been difficult to imagine in orderly Hong Kong, a city where you line up neatly for an elevator door and crowds don't step into an empty street until the signal changes."[22]

In what follows, I will lay out the corresponding implications in terms of the use and adaptation, movement within, and re-conceptualization of the urban spaces involved, all of which, I argue, constitute contemporary manifestations of *jianghu*.

INHABITING AND TRANSFORMING THE INFRASTRUCTURES OF FLOWS

At first, Victoria Park formed the primary gathering and starting point for the formally organized demonstrations against the extradition bill. As the largest park in Hong Kong, it serves as a frequent location for regular public events, including the annual Tiananmen vigil (suspended since 2019). After a while, the movement shifted from Victoria Park to transitory spaces in the city

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such as shopping mall atria, underpasses, elevated walkways, tram stops, roads, highways, traffic islands, and the footings of freeway columns; precisely those spaces that are dedicated to ensuring efficient traffic flow—pedestrian or motorized—that are either not designed or even prohibited for sojourn. The choice of locations and the actions taken within them not only ensured greater visibility and impact of the movement, but they also led to a material and conceptual transformation of these spaces. They were rendered dysfunctional through the protesters' actions that caused traffic to slow down or to come to a complete stand-still. This constituted a direct confrontation with both the government and the order of everyday life in the city. Hong Kong's urban density further potentiated the effectiveness of these blockages due to its large population relying on only few high-performing infrastructural arteries for their daily commutes.

On the one hand, the transformation of these transitional spaces was established through the bodily movement and occupation of the protesters, which broke with common societal norms in Hong Kong. On the other hand, the spatial mutation was achieved by the physical alteration of the spaces themselves: The walls of underground tunnels and pedestrian bridges leading to major transport hubs—usually characterized by mute and sanitary tile or glass surfaces—were covered with post-its and flyers. In aggregation these formed a thick pixelated tapestry of Chinese poetry, messages offering emotional support, calls for political change, and practical announcements. Guardrails along pedestrian sidewalks were dismantled only to be rearranged into various forms of barricades, physically and metaphorically breaking with rules and regulations that shape Hong Kong's everyday life. Roads and highways were sprinkled with arrangements of paving bricks that transformed them into so-called "brick battlegrounds."[23] These were more than simple barricades. The strategic composition and distribution of clusters of bricks presented tactics explicitly aimed at preventing police response. In the process they hindered general road traffic as well. These intentional arrangements produced their own aesthetics through the spatial and material transformation of the road into a new kind of urban landscape that was now inaccessible to cars: a *jianghu* sphere that called for a mode of movement and inhabitation by the human body different from the normative ways of navigating the city; perhaps a new form of *qinggong*—the ability to move lightly and swiftly to "cross difficult terrain and scale walls quickly."[24]

Roads and highways constitute a most direct analogy between *jianghu* and Hong Kong's physical urban spaces. Resonating with the metaphor of "rivers and lakes" these are spaces for flows of traffic; they are separated, dynamic, and they are dangerous to the unprotected body.

The occupation and transformation of these urban territories establishes jianghu both as an alternative space as well as an alternative mode of conduct, radically breaking with normative behavior, while at the same time exerting enormous pressure on the government by blocking the flows of the city that are synonymous with its livelihood and efficiency.

BECOMING WATER

The Umbrella Movement in 2014 had adopted a sedentary approach, which involved the occupation of public sites in three locations in the form of temporary settlements, comprised of tents and managed collectively. In contrast, the 2019 protests developed an entirely different strategy—one of fluidity and anonymity.

The protesters took inspiration from Bruce Lee's quote "be like water," which—albeit originating in popular culture—is a direct reference to the martial arts tradition and the teachings of Taoism.[25] They rephrased it to describe their own tactics: Be strong like ice. Be fluid like water. Gather like dew. Scatter like mist. The protests were organized in a dispersed, temporary, and dynamically shifting manner, popping up in various locations, making it difficult to predict when and where they would occur, and for police to respond. The non-hierarchical organization without any identifiable leadership inhibited the police from pinpointing anyone responsible. The gear worn by the activists provided physical protection from teargas and basic equipment for defense and attack, and at the same time, it veiled the wearers' identity, ensuring anonymity despite the omnipresence of security cameras, mobile phone cameras, and press cameras. The quasi-uniform outfit also led to the dissolution of the individual body into the group of acting bodies, foregrounding their alliance and cause, and the impression of both single parts and masses of dynamically changing matter moving in urban space.

With a heightened awareness of urban surveillance technology, activists took an array of measures to incapacitate or bypass it. These ranged from the spraying of surveillance cameras to more sophisticated spatial tactics, such as the occupation of and movement across roofs of buildings and elevated walkways—modes of traversing the city previously only known from Hong Kong's gangster movies—to evade the field of vision of surveillance cameras in the city's pedestrian walkway system, effectively hiding in plain sight. They became invisible to the authorities' cameras and face recognition software yet remained highly visible to Hong Kong citizens looking up from the streetscape, over from adjoining walkways or down from office and residential towers. Hong Kong's unique morphology and density significantly contributed to the formation as well as the increase in intensity of this confrontation and juxtaposition of the ordered and the unruly, the hidden and the visible. The explicit use of water metaphors led to the protests being named the "Water Revolution" in news coverage.[26] The variety of such metaphors used to develop, communicate, and perform protest tactics suggest an overall strategy of becoming water to find anonymity and a segregated space of action in the "rivers and lakes" that are *jianghu*.

DIGITAL JIANGHU

Social media and the internet played a key role in the mobilization and organization of the movement, as well as in developing forms of counter surveillance directed at the authorities through the strategic documentation and subsequent broadcasting of actions conducted by the police. Digital tactics employed by the activists included a combination of online art, forums, and live streaming. Fearful that the Hong Kong government might increasingly adopt measures of internet surveillance and censorship known to be employed in Mainland China, the protesters' set of social media applications and technologies of data sharing was carefully curated as to not leave any digital traces of their identities. The use of non-mainstream messenger apps—the Telegram application and the local LIHKG Forum — in combination with the use of airdropping via their smartphones to exchange information, enabled them to carve out spaces of anonymity and to set up encoded channels of communication in the digital realm to match their strategies in physical space.[27]

The working principles and the effectiveness of the social media platforms enabled self-organization without de-fined leadership through real-time aggregation and communication of individual initiative. This corresponds to *jianghu* as an anarchic, dynamic space, in which individuals act alone or in alliances yet without any hierarchical order of command. It

constitutes a parallel realm that stands in opposition to an established societal order and at the same time evades the grip of its control.

THE EMERGENCE OF CONTEMPORARY JIANGHU IN HONG KONG

In times of normality, *jianghu* exists in films and novels in Chinese culture. In times of crisis and political change, this concept can transform actual spaces into versions of *jianghu* and to create a mental space for retreat from, reflection on, re-projection of, and potentially the overturning of the status quo.

What we witnessed in 2019 in Hong Kong was the emergence of a contemporary form of *jianghu*, as a hybridization of digital space, material space, and spatial practices. In absence of any certainty or promising outlook in the face of the expiry date of Hong Kong's status as Special Administration in 2047 and following a severe loss of trust in their government to uphold and defend the rights of Hong Kong citizens stipulated in the Basic Law, the radical branch of Hong Kong protesters took a momentous step to withdraw themselves from the established order and governmental care to fight for their own vision of political justice. In line with literary accounts of *jianghu*, they produced a new space of action through their own codes and tactics, a parallel world of alternative rules and negotiation of power.[28] They radically transformed the space of the city to form the backdrop for their actions and to match their change in conduct. In the ever-increasing escalation of the confrontation between protesters and police the city had turned into a smoking chaos. By late fall 2019 the government had fully withdrawn the extradition bill, though this delayed move failed to generate a substantial sense of resolve. By that time, *jianghu* had fully unfolded in the territory and in the temper of its young adult generation. Clemens von Haselberg describes *jianghu* as a parallel world, as a counterpart to the "public" world of officialdom,

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but also as its mirror.[29] The protests aggressively confronted the Hong Kong government, expressing deep dissatisfaction and distrust. At the same time, the sudden cutting of ties with conformist behavior by its youth and their metamorphosis into radical subjects throwing themselves into a fight against an intricate conglomerate of forces plainly exposed the impracticality of the very foundations that the "Special Administration" is built upon—the political agreements that grant it a controlled autonomy with an expiry date.

The full ramifications of the emergence of *jianghu* in contemporary Hong Kong remain to be seen. The Hong Kong government's hardened response to the unrest and the imposing of a new National Security Law by Beijing would have only amplified the lingering dissent. Meanwhile the movement has been brought to a halt by the global pandemic, and for now the streets of Hong Kong are muted by restrictive measures in the name of public health.

Whatever the consequences of these events will be, the emergence of *jianghu* in Hong Kong's urban space demonstrates that a meaningful connection exists between cultural conceptions and spatial practices. This interrelation alters both the formation as well as our perception of collective life in cities and modifies the notion of what is normatively described as "public space." Our discussion of the form and functions of shared urban spaces can be much enriched if we are able to introduce place-specific cultural conceptions and spatial practices in our understanding of different cities around the world.

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