TO BE LIKE WATER
SUPPORTING THE PROTESTORS OF HONG KONG

An interview with IP, Kim-Ching
Over the last few months, as the world watches on, literally millions of Hong Kong residents have taken to the streets and engaged in a range of other diverse actions and protests. Narrative practitioners have been involved in many ways, including in seeking to offer support to young people involved in the protests who have been affected by the violent responses of Police and the lack of responsiveness of Hong Kong government.

This interview with IP Kim-Ching describes some of the actions that practitioners are taking including face-to-face, online and phone support. This interview is being shared with practitioners in other countries for a number of reasons. Firstly, to honour the efforts of the people of Hong Kong. Secondly, because Hong Kong colleagues have spoken of the significance of experiencing a sense of connection and solidarity with others at this time – that this contributes to sustaining their actions. And thirdly, because the skill and dedication of Hong Kong practitioners has a lot to offer to those in other communities who are seeking to support activists and social movements.

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The interviewers were David Denborough and Cheryl White from Dulwich Centre. Peter Hollams was also present.
DD: Ching, before we hear about some of the ways you have gone about setting up online and phone supports for young demonstrators, to create places they can trust, it might be important for readers to understand a little more about the broader context of the current protests in Hong Kong.

Ching: It’s relevant to know that we have a certain tradition of protesting here. Hong Kong is sometimes known as the capital or the city of peaceful walks.

DD: As in peaceful marches?

Ching: Yes. There is also a long history of people in Hong Kong needing to protect and take action in relation to our freedoms, and also Hong Kong being a place where people have sought freedom from persecution.

Recent years we have seen the Occupy Central movement protest for a true democratic nation in 2014. It was after this movement that some of us, clinical psychologists and educational psychologists, formed a small group. Initially, we wrote articles for newspapers and did some other media work, including interviewing those who were involved in the 2014 protest movement. Between 2014 and this year, there was not so much protest action, but in recent times the Hong Kong political situation has become more harsh, restrictive and less democratic. You may have heard of some democratically elected legislative councillors (parliamentarians) being disqualified for spurious reasons. And strict limitations being placed on the amount of time legislative councillors can speak. Other alarming events have also occurred, such as a number of book publishers disappearing. While these events took place over the last few years, our small group of about 10 psychologists kept some connection, but we were only involved in small initiatives.

This year a new protest movement gained momentum, and when violence broke out, because we are a helping profession, we wanted to help. When we saw the youngsters and even the adults being brutally physically abused by the police, then we felt we really needed to do something. So we connect more people, more friends and colleagues through our WhatsApp group.

DD: So you formed this WhatsApp group back in 2014, and kept connection over these past five years, but then it expanded at this time of upheaval …

Ching: Yes and through these connections we discussed what more we could do. There was a particular event that sparked further action. On the 12th June, tens of thousands of Hong Kongers protested about proposed extradition legislation outside of the legislative council. This was a peaceful demonstration, but the police used excessive force and violence. It was in response to the Police violence and the way the government responded that then led to two million Hong Kongers taking to the streets the following weekend, on the 16th June. Our group set up a phone hotline at this time and we also operated a stall, at the side of the street, during the protest march.

DD: Is this what you call a talking station?

Ching: Yes. We created a talking station, so if someone is upset or emotional during the protest they can sit down and talk with us. It’s as simple as that. And the phone hotline and the online
system we set up is another way for anyone emotionally disturbed by their experiences, can reach out to us. We also accept direct referrals from the frontline social workers or lawyers. These are social workers and first-aiders who position themselves at the frontline of the protests – sometimes to mediate between police and protestors, sometimes to care for protestors who have been injured. The young people sometimes connect with these frontline social workers and first-aiders and they refer the young people to us after the event.

DD: Can you explain why it’s particularly significant to have your independent group of psychologists or counsellors offering this support … why wouldn’t the young people be willing to access regular services of hospitals?

Ching: At the height of the 12th of June protests, many Hong Kong people who were injured by the misuse of violence and force of the Police went to hospitals for physical treatment, and the Police went inside these hospitals and ask for the personal information of the patients – in order to track them down. While some hospital staff tried to help the protestors and refuse Police requests, but many cooperated, gave out the information and the police caught protestors at the hospital. The news of this spread out on the internet, so that protestors are now legitimately afraid to seek help in hospitals. So much so that it’s been necessary to create alternative ways to take care of physical injured people during protests, and also alternative avenues for people psychologically injured or affected. This is why we set up a volunteer hotline. Actually, there are many existing hotlines in Hong Kong, but we are afraid that some of them are not so secure. It is therefore crucial for us not only to confidentiality, but for us to carefully screen all the volunteers so we know we can keep the highest confidentiality of those who call us.

DD: Yes, I imagine you would have to be very careful as to who can be trusted.

Ching: That is why it is important our group has been connected for some years and we know each other well. There are sometimes anonymous calls who ask for information and we are not sure they are really emotionally disturbed people or they are calling for another purpose. So we need to be very cautious.

DD: Okay, so your initial actions were to set up a talking station and the hotline. As this interview will be read by narrative practitioners, can you give us a bit of a sense of some of the conversations you share either in the talking station or via the hotline?

Ching: Some of the callers are really experiencing shock, a certain form of trauma. Part of this was that the response of the Police was unexpected. There is tradition here of the Police giving prior warning of actions that they are going to take, including when they will use tear gas. But on June 12 and subsequently, it would seem as if tear gas was coming out of nowhere. The warning systems from the police were not operating like they used to. And tear gas was being launched across two or three blocks. This means that people far the front line were being directly hit by the tear gas.

There is a division of labour in protest marches. Some people are prepared to go to the frontline. They are ready and willing to face off with the police and they are prepared for possible
consequences. Others are only prepared to participate in the back of the march. If people in the back of the march are then attacked with tear gas or even rubber bullets, they show shock.

Many of the people at the back are very young, some of them 15 or even younger, and they were not prepared for what occurred. This brings shock. Some of them would lie awake at night not being able to sleep and constantly thinking about the experience. Being shocked with tear gas and rubber bullets can sometimes even be an experience like near death. There was a much greater concentration of tear gas used on June 12 than usual and if there are too many tear gas canisters in one place there is sometimes terrible choking. Luckily there was first aid around, but for some young people with asthma, who were choking, this experience can leave them with lasting memories. For some of these young people we followed up the telephone conversations, with face to face counselling.

DD: In hearing you speak, I am remembering the images I saw on the television, and I’m just thinking of the bravery of the people of Hong Kong and these young people. I also remember how in 2014, there was such movement and such hope in relation to the ‘umbrella movement’ and then those hopes got rather crushed didn’t they? It sounds like all those efforts of 2014 have somehow come back to life? That they have risen again …

Ching: Yes. In the beginning of 2019, we as psychologists were thinking about how to help young people keep the hope, how we could resist hopelessness. Actually some my friends left Hong King, they migrated, because they are hopeless. The younger people, however, are full of energy and power because they cannot and choose not to move away. They speak of how they will “stay here and fight for this land”. I think that is their motto; that is their passion.

CW: I have a question about the ripples of intergenerational experience. Quite some years ago when we focused an issue of the International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work on Hong Kong, we interviewed people from Hong Kong about their family history of getting here. So many people sought a new life here, either when China became communist, or during the famines, or during the Cultural Revolution. They walked, they swam to get here with all their possessions on their back, carrying their babies on their shoulders. And now, all these years later, with the people of Hong Kong fearful about what the future holds in relation to the actions of the Chinese government, are there intergenerational ripples connecting back with these earlier experiences? What does this present time mean for those older people …

Ching: These intergenerational experiences are very significant. My mother directly experienced hardship from the communist party. My maternal grandfather was killed by the communist party because he owned some land. As a descendant of those who made a new life here, I think their stance of persistence within hardship, and how they kept hope alive through very hard times, are things we draw upon today. I think it is all connected. Now, it is a younger generation, much younger than me, who are key participants in the current protest movement. I’m very interested to interview more of them in
DD: Can you say more about the legacies of the older generations that you think are now being carried forth?

Ching: For example, my mother’s story provides diverse legacies. On the one hand, it is a kind of patience to bear almost anything that I find hard to describe, and there are also legacies of courage and persistence. There are multiple legacies from their generation. I think it is complex how these are passed on to the next generation. There could be some legacies that are helpful at this time and others that are complex …

CW: I was just thinking that the extradition bill, the idea that people could be arrested here and sent to mainland China could be terrifying for some older people?

Ching: Yes. There is a path of fear. And sometimes parents and grandparents are searching for their grandchildren on the streets. There also fake videos that circulate sometimes that heighten these fears … videos that show the Communist army cars or tanks in Hong Kong, when these images are actually from some years ago and not at all relevant. So sometime people play on these fears also.

CW: Are parents and grandparents also proud of the actions of the young?

Ching: Yes. Fearful and proud. Both stories. It is also important for us to find ways to understand each other across the generations. In 2014, there was a so-called division between the people who were fighting for democracy. Some of them wanted to use a more high impact strategy and others of them, like me, said we should use peaceful ways, reasoning and no violence. In 2014, we would disagree with each other, scold each other and divide from each other. But not this time. This time is it is different. We say, ‘brothers can climb the same mountain in different ways’.

DD: Can you say more about that?

Ching: There is a Chinese expression that says ‘Brothers climb the mountains in different ways, and each of us tries to pay our utmost effort.’ This philosophy means that there is no argument, no conflict, between protestors this time around. Some of us are peaceful marchers, while others will try direct confrontation with the police.

DD: It also seems a very clear philosophy this time around not to have a leader. Is that right? It seems a very clear philosophy.

Ching: Yes, it’s a very de-centring movement this time around. There is a commitment not to create leaders or single spokespeople. Even during the protest marches, it’s amazingly de-centring and yet very organised Sometimes the march will suddenly move in one direction, and then all spread out and disappear within 15 minutes.

DD: Is this all through the use of social media? That’s how people communicate?

Ching: Yes that’s right. And instead of creating leaders there is a clear philosophy that everybody can play different equally important roles. The front line social workers that I mentioned before are playing a key role. They are frontline in the barricade, where they sit, where they stand. They do not march, they
do not use violence. And sometimes they mediate with the police. Their role is most important after midnight, when they are still there, and when the peaceful demonstrators have mostly gone home. This is the most dangerous time for the more energised, high impact youngsters, and the police will come out then too. Sometimes the frontline social workers stand there to contain the speed of the police, so there is enough time for the youngsters to run away.

There are so many different roles that people are playing and they are all acknowledged and honoured. We say that in this movement we must be like water.

DD: Can you say more about that?

Ching: When water is moving, you don’t always know which way it will move. A river will adjust to the contours of the landscape and it will change the landscape. At times water can be mild and peaceful, and when the time comes, it can be very powerful. It can move mountains. At this time in Hong Kong, we must be like water.

CW: Are songs also playing a part? We saw media coverage of songs from Les Mis being used ‘Can you hear the people sing?’

Ching: Yes. And in this time, Christians are also playing an important role. They get into position and sing ‘Hallelujah to the lord’ in a way that generated a certain spirit. It perhaps draws more peaceful protesting. They are so calm compared to the atmosphere of the police and the more agitated youngsters. In 2014, the protest movement may have used foul language against those Christian people, but not this time. Because this time, we are all climbing the same mountain in different ways.

DD: That’s really interesting to me. I have a question now that might be rather more difficult to answer. All these philosophies and principles, that are shaping the current protest movement, are they also shaping your counselling response in any way? So far you have described the decentering of leadership; the honouring of diverse forms of action (different ways of climbing the same mountain); and trying to create a social movement like water … when you are responding to the young people who are struggling after their experiences within the protests are there any ways in which these political principles are also shaping your counselling practice?

Ching: Your question reminds me of what Michael White used to say: ‘When we are counselling, there is no one path the conversation could take, there are many paths. We follow what is of significant to the person we are talking to.’ This, to me, is like water. The water metaphor, I think, is wonderful. During the 2014 protests, in which the umbrella came to symbolise the movement, I created a narrative methodology called the Umbrella of Life (Ching, 2018) because the umbrella as an image was so resonant for us at that time. I used it in my counselling work with young people who were despairing after Occupation Central came to an end. Your question makes me think about how, with my psychological teammates, we are talking about the need for us to be like water. We must find new ways to help those in need of help at this time. There are also some existing narrative practices that are very useful. For instance, outsider witness practice.
DD: How do you use outsider witness practice in this context?

Ching: When we meet in small groups to offer psychological, emotional support to the students and young people, when one of them presents the experience of their story during the protest, we ask the others what especially caught their attention, what was the resonance, and what difference it has meant to hear their colleague’s story. In such political or protest contexts, sometimes people are very eager to analyse and talk about what can be done to move on, or to discuss tactics. I find this use of outsider witness practice very helpful. Even though they are in the movement together, they may even witness each other during the protests, but it’s very rare to actually be able to talk about and share and acknowledge each other’s experiences in this way. Often they have had no chance to talk about the emotions or thoughts that they were having in the moment and they treasure the chance to talk like this. It is sustaining of them and of their action.

CW: I imagine that you are thinking a lot about how to respond to this situation of people ending their lives and linking this to political action. Do you have a sense if these people have committed suicide as a demonstration – like the monks in Vietnam protesting the persecution of Buddhists? Or that they are committing suicide because they don’t want to live with all that is happening … or other meanings?

Ching: I cannot say for certain as I did not know personally the few people who chose to end their lives. In at least one of the situations, it seemed clear that this was a chosen death as protest. I cannot be sure of the others because, when people call the hotline or we meet face-to-face, of course people also have histories and wider lives. I’m not saying that the political situation is not a major factor in each of these deaths. In the last few years there are many aspects of life in Hong Kong that can bring a sense of hopelessness. So these actions of people taking their lives, they definitely involve some kind of protest, but we don’t know what lives these fellow citizens were living and all that influenced their decisions.
We don’t know this but we do know it makes a difference how we respond to their deaths. When I have spoken to the local media about this, I am very clear that there is no need to pathologise these people for taking their lives. And I am also very clear that we need to pay tribute to them, to memorialise them, not as a hero but as one of us.

DD: Can you say a bit more about that? I think that sounds very significant.

Ching: It is linked to what I spoke about before. We do not want to turn anyone into a hero in this movement. We don’t need one single leader or individual heroes. Everyone can take up the lead because this is everyone’s business. The whole Hong Kong people should be out, should be aware of our situation, and we all should do what we can do. There are many ways to climb this mountain, not just one. And we must be like water. Those who have taken their own lives, we don’t need to make them a hero. But they are one of us so we must remember them. On the June 16th, it was said that two million people marched. Some of us made t-shirts, saying there were not two million people marching, there were two million and one people marching. This was to remember and honour the first person who took their own life in the week prior to that march.

DD: You have brought us to tears.

Ching: I cry more this year than in 2014. The young people are touching my heart. They are so brave. They sacrifice a lot. The pressure on some of them is so great, and they needed to go into hiding now. They do not have contact with us directly. So we have been in touch with them through some of their lawyers.

DD: You are thinking about how to support them through the lawyers?

Ching: Yes.

CW: How can the international community offer support at this time Ching?

Ching: This is a time when it is good to know that people are thinking of us. That we are not alone.

DD: We will type up your words Ching. I’ll send them back to you and then we will circulate this through the international narrative practice community so that people know both what the people of Hong Kong are facing and also how you and your team are supporting the young protestors of Hong Kong. I remember talking with you in what was a sad time after the 2014 protests. There was a sense then that those protests had somehow failed. How do you see this now? Do you see the profound social movement happening now as somehow linked to all that happened in 2014?

Ching: Seeds were planted in 2014. And seeds were planted by earlier generations. Maybe now these seeds are meeting with water. We don’t know what will bloom. And I would not say we are optimistic. But we are proud of our young people. And we will do what we can to support them.

Reference

To read more about the history of Hong Kong, see: Mark Li Kin-yin, (2004). Key historical moments in the making of modern Hong Kong. International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work, (1), 40-43.