

# Coalition Moments in Hong Kong's Anti-Extradition Law Movement: Cross-Racial Solidarities and Their Limitations

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**Abstract:** *While Hong Kong's Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill (ELAB) Movement in 2019 did not lead to systemic policy changes, the protests provided coalitional moments for mainstream Hongkongers to connect with the city's marginalised South Asian community. This essay first contextualises the positionality and history of marginalisation of South Asians in Hong Kong. It then examines moments of rupture during the Anti-ELAB Movement that fostered solidarity between the two ethnic groups. This case study illustrates how anti-authoritarian social movements and the affective charge of protests help cultivate a politics of relation that supersedes racialisation.*

**Keywords:** *Hong Kong, Protests, Social Movements, Racism, Ethnic Minorities*

Beginning in June 2019, Hong Kong was embroiled in protests against a proposed amendment to the city's extradition rules. The grassroots anti-authoritarian movement was met with police violence and legal persecutions, culminating in the abrupt adoption in mid 2020 of the National Security Law (NSL) that effectively rendered any expressions of dissent in the city seditious and illegal. While the NSL has ostensibly put an end to the protests, the movement has left multiple legacies, including the emergence during the

mobilisation of meaningful coalitions among different social sectors, some of which extended across racial lines.

While much has been written about this type of cross-sectoral solidarity, the ethnic and racial components of the protests have been largely overlooked in discussions of the Hong Kong movement (Lee 2020; Au 2020; Wu 2020; Lai and Sing 2020). During the height of the movement in 2019, mainstream Hongkongers—a term that refers to Han Chinese in the former British colony who are not recent immigrants from mainland China—collaborated more meaningfully than ever before with the marginalised South Asian community in the city in a dynamic that attracted some attention from local activists and journalists (Lew 2019; Carvalho 2019; Lau 2019; Chor 2019). However, as I will discuss in this essay, despite early enthusiasm among mainstream Han Hongkongers for the performances of solidarities between the two groups, the coalitional potential nevertheless remained entrapped in dominant racial logics and structures of marginalisation.

While there are other racialised minorities in Hong Kong—most of them Southeast Asian women who are hired by local households as domestic workers—here I focus on the South Asian community because they occupy a specific status of racial, social, and legal liminality. While Southeast Asian domestic workers are never granted even the right to apply for permanent residency, South Asians

can do so. However, due to racism, some, despite their sense of belonging and embeddedness in Hong Kong society, are denied full citizenship status. The calls for solidarity during the Anti-ELAB Movement brought to the fore this ambiguous status of South Asians. While some were reluctant to participate because of their systemic marginalisation, others saw the movement as an opportunity to assert their belonging to Hong Kong. By examining the coalitional moments between mainstream Han Hongkongers and South Asians during the Anti-ELAB Movement, this essay sheds light on the extent and limitations of cross-racial solidarities against the backdrop of colonial histories and racism.

### Hong Kong's Racial Underpinnings

As one of the last colonies to leave British rule, in mid 1997, Hong Kong remains suffused with logics of neocolonialism and white supremacy; at the same time, the city has a largely homogeneous society, with 94 per cent of the population (7.482 million in 2020) ethnic Han Chinese. Amounting to about 1 per cent of Hong Kong's population, the South Asian community first settled in the city as traders and as members of the colonial military and police forces under the British administration in the late nineteenth century (White 1994). While some South Asians were initially granted British citizenship in Hong Kong starting in 1948, their status was whittled away in the 1960s as the United Kingdom revised its nationality law to limit the numbers of citizens in its colonies (Karatani 2004). As a result, while most South Asians in Hong Kong possess permanent residence status in the Special Administrative Region (SAR), formally, they still carry the nationality they inherited from their ancestors before the colonial administration. When they attempted to naturalise and apply for a Hong Kong SAR

passport, some South Asians—despite fulfilling all eligibilities—were turned away by immigration officers for not possessing 'Chinese blood' (Yam 2019). It is important to note that blood ties are not a stated legal requirement for naturalisation, but they were nevertheless mobilised to bar minority South Asians from formal recognition as citizens.

Many South Asians, despite having been settled in Hong Kong for generations, are therefore still not recognised as members of mainstream Hong Kong society (Yam 2019). They are frequently reminded of their denizen status through everyday acts of racial discrimination and de facto segregation in education and workplaces. Not only do South Asians face systemic discrimination and racism in their everyday lives, but also they are frequently portrayed as either criminals or buffoons in mainstream popular media (Yam 2019; Erni and Leung 2014; Mathews 2011).

Socioeconomically, many South Asians take on low-paying positions as construction workers or security guards at banks and apartment buildings. Others run small businesses in Tsim Sha Tsui and Jordan—working-class areas populated by some of the first Indian settlers during the colonial era. Many of these South Asian business owners—along with African asylum-seekers and refugees—converge in a dilapidated building called Chungking Mansions, participating in what local anthropologist Gordon Mathews (2011: 19) calls 'low-end globalisation' that involves 'the transnational flow of people and goods involving relatively small amounts of capital and informal, sometimes semilegal or illegal, transactions commonly associated with "the developing world"'. Seeing the Chungking Mansions as 'an alien island of the developing world lying in Hong Kong's heart' (Mathews 2011: 15), local Hongkongers have developed a historical distaste—and even fear—towards the place, believing it houses dangerous dark-skinned criminals and perverts. Until very

recently, Hong Kong media often reinforced this negative impression of the building, with Wong Kar-wai's famous 1994 film *Chungking Express* a key example of how the local movie industry exoticises and alienates both the Mansions and the South Asians who lived and worked in it.

### The Attack on Jimmy Sham

During the Anti-ELAB Movement, Chungking Mansions and a popular nearby mosque—Hong Kong's largest—became key sites of tension. On 17 October 2019, the twentieth week of the protest, Jimmy Sham, an activist and the convenor of the Civil Human Rights Front, a leftist umbrella organisation that encompassed a wide range of grassroots advocacy groups, was attacked by three assailants of South Asian descent just a few days before a march he organised was to take place. Most believed the assault was politically motivated to deter him from further organising and, while Sham urged movement supporters not to target South Asian people, some netizens vowed they would retaliate with violence against members of that community.

Fortunately, the attack on Sham also ended up producing some coalitional moments among Hongkongers of different positionalities. As the voices of those who were calling for revenge were growing louder, most movement supporters on LIHKG, a Reddit-like forum frequented by protesters, took a strong stance against retaliation. In a popular post that drew more than 6,000 upvotes, one author wrote in Chinese: 'During this Sunday's march, undercover cops will likely pretend to be protesters and damage the mosque and Chungking Mansions. We must protect those buildings.' In the same post, the author noted that if Hong Kong protesters attacked and vandalised South Asian businesses, they would be committing racist hate crimes; doing so would not only alienate potential allies abroad,

but it also might discourage US legislators from backing the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act—a bill then under discussion that would allow the United States to impose sanctions on Hong Kong and Chinese officials for violating the rights of protesters. Others on the thread commented that Western countries, especially the United States, prioritised racial justice, and hence Hongkongers could not risk appearing racist towards ethnic minorities.

It is important to note here that the protesters' rationale to protect Chungking Mansions and the mosque originated from their own interests and investment in the movement rather than a sense of intersubjectivity and cross-difference alliance based on shared struggles. By not condemning violence against the South Asian community, the post implicitly suggested that such acts were acceptable—as long as they did not incur negative consequences for the movement. Hence, while protesters on LIHKG announced that they would protect, rather than harm, South Asian individuals and businesses, this act was not intended for coalition-building.

Coalition across difference entails a recognition that one's struggles and interests are deeply intertwined with those of others—so much so that the shared struggles take precedence over one's rigid in-group identity. In the aftermath of the attack on Jimmy Sham, however, mainstream Han Hong Kong protesters continued to see their identity and interests as distinct from those of South Asian residents in the city. In fact, earlier in the movement, a rumour swirled around suggesting that South Asians were hired by pro-government forces to harass protesters. As a response, mainstream Han Hongkongers circulated text messages in Urdu that asked the South Asian community not to 'accept bribes' to 'beat up' protesters, further entrenching the stereotype of South Asians as thugs and the assumption that these minorities were not *true* Hongkongers capable of being loyal to the anti-authoritarian movement (Lau 2019).

## The Tsim Sha Tsui Prodemocracy March

Another coalitional moment that happened soon after the attack on Sham motivated some mainstream Han Hongkongers to perform a coalitional subjectivity that challenged the binary between mainstream Han and South Asian Hongkongers. For intersectional feminist and social movement scholar Karma Chávez (2010: 144), a coalitional subjectivity ‘provides the agency to resist in ways not bound by fixed identities or subjectivities as one learns to politicize her/his belongings and adopt impure stances that allow for connection between people and groups who are very different’. Put differently, this mode of relating opens the possibilities to redress existing forms of marginalisation and fissures within a movement. Just a few days after the assault on Sham, the planned pro-democracy march took place in Tsim Sha Tsui. While mainstream Han Hong Kong protesters held up signs outside the mosque to urge their peers to respect religion, South Asian activists and community members set up a stall in front of Chungking Mansions to hand out water and egg tarts to marchers. In addition to shouting ‘We are all Hongkongers’, the group also sang the protest anthem ‘Glory to Hong Kong’. At one point, Jeffrey Andrews, a leading South Asian activist and social worker, led a call and response with the crowd in Cantonese:

‘Will you guys still be afraid of Chungking Mansions any longer?’ he shouted into the microphone. ‘No!’ the crowd responded. ‘Will you guys still be afraid of South Asians?’ he asked. ‘No!’ the crowd roared back. ‘We are all Hong Kongers, yes or no?’ he asked. ‘Yes!’ (Hui 2019)

Andrews and the South Asian residents at

Chungking Mansions prompted mainstream Hongkongers to consider how they construct their identity and sense of allegiance. Fully aware of the racist stereotypes of South Asians and Chungking Mansions, Andrews’ call-and-response suggested that South Asians, too, are Hongkongers. In the context of the popular prodemocracy movement, the definition of Hongkongers gained new connotations: rather than defined primarily by one’s race and ethnicity, Hongkongers came to encompass movement co-strugglers who had a stake in the city.

In response to the gestures of solidarity from the South Asian community, netizens on LIHKG organised a ‘day of gratitude’ after the march. For instance, they designed a poster that urged mainstream Hongkongers to patronise South Asian businesses in the building five days after the march. The poster said: ‘On 20 October [the day of the march], South Asian comrades [手足] contributed to Hong Kong. They did not distinguish between us versus them as they provided water and food to support Hongkongers. We are Hongkongers. We eat together.’ Unfortunately, while well-intentioned, this poster also signalled the imperfection of the coalitional moment. Even though it encouraged mainstream Han Hongkongers to support the South Asian community, it nevertheless reinforced the binary between the two groups. Most ironically, the poster used images from Wong Kar-wai’s abovementioned *Chungking Express*, which depicted South Asians as transnational criminals. Another image used on the poster was of Gill Mohindapaul Singh, a Hong Kong actor who was most famously known as a comedic buffoon on screen. In other words, despite mainstream Hongkongers’ intention to cultivate coalition and solidarity across racial difference, they were unable to overcome entrenched racial logics that marked South Asians as outsiders.





**Poster circulated by Hong Kong netizens in late 2020 in response to the gestures of solidarity from the South Asian community. Source: Eric Cheung’s Twitter account.**

Later that day, as the march drew to a close, a police water cannon fired blue dye at the mosque, even though there were no protesters in sight. The corrosive liquid not only stained the building blue, but also injured several South Asian community leaders who were standing by the gate. The police attack on the place of worship ignited anger not just from the South Asian and Muslim communities, but also from mainstream Han Hong Kong protesters. An hour later, dozens of the last gathered at the mosque to help community members clean the building’s front gate and pavement. Others posted messages on LIHKG that evening to organise a collective cleanup the next day. Afterwards, the Muslim Council of Hong Kong—an organisation that advocates for the rights of Muslim ethnic minorities in the city—circulated a drawing of black-clad protesters peacefully wiping blue stains off the gate of the mosque. At the bottom of the image was written: ‘HKer is not defined by race.’ During the Anti-ELAB Movement, protesters commonly used black garb as a tactic to evade police surveillance. Disguising individual

protesters’ identity to create a dissenting collective, the black bloc encouraged protesters to think of one another as fellow members of the movement. By depicting the volunteer cleaners in black bloc, the drawing asserted the sense of allegiance and solidarity the volunteers shared with one another at that moment, regardless of their racial differences.



**Image circulated by the Muslim Council of Hong Kong in the wake of the police attack on the Tsim Sha Tsui mosque in October 2020. Source: Muslim Council of Hong Kong’s Twitter account.**

**Crushed Blossoms**

Coalitional moments such as those described in this essay may be temporary and ignited only during critical political crises. Similar demonstrations of cross-racial and cross-national solidarity occurred during the 2014 Umbrella Movement and the 2012 anti-national education movement in Hong Kong. While South Asian protesters felt accepted by mainstream Hongkongers as they marched alongside one another, some were quickly disillusioned after the temporary demonstrations of solidarity: as the protest waned, structural racism and deeply ingrained stigma against South Asians did not dissipate in any significant way. As journalist Jessie Lau (2019) has observed: ‘Minorities were celebrated by protesters as proof of local inclusion, but their interests were subsumed during broader political discussions, which were largely publicized and conducted solely through Cantonese, with excursions into Mandarin.’

Since the Anti-ELAB Movement, however, mainstream Hongkongers have become seemingly more sensitive to the systemic marginalisation of South Asians, with the tentative coalition between the two groups sustained by shared experiences of oppression and alienation. Unfortunately, while this coalition carries the potential to gradually transform the ethnocratic structure and culture in Hong Kong, many advocacy groups, civil rights organisations, and media outlets that could facilitate such social change have since dissolved under the draconian NSL. Coalitional organising, or any political organising for that matter, has become almost impossible in Hong Kong now without incurring significant political risks (Yeung 2021). In this context, it is unlikely the cross-racial coalitional moments during the protest will have any sustainable, long-term impact.

Indeed, everyday and structural racism remain persistent after the Anti-ELAB Movement. During the Covid-19 pandemic crisis, South

Asians were repeatedly singled out by both the government and *Apple Daily* (苹果日报), a now-defunct tabloid newspaper popular among prodemocracy Hongkongers, as disease vectors (for a review of these racist declarations, see Hui 2021). When Yau Tsim Mong, a district populated by working-class South Asians, was suddenly placed under lockdown by the government in early 2021, many found themselves in a detrimental situation: while some low-wage workers faced the prospect of being fired for failing to show up for work, South Asian Muslim residents could not consume the food packages distributed by the government as they contained pork (Yu and Mahtani 2021). While racial minorities faced rampant racism and marginalisation during the pandemic, ironically, they also formed the backbone of Hong Kong’s economy during this time by performing essential labour, such as food and grocery deliveries, and cleaning services. Not only were South Asians exploited by their employers as disposable cheap labour (Lui et al. 2021; Sun et al. 2022), but also they faced rampant discrimination from local mainstream Hongkongers (Business & Human Rights Resource Centre 2021). These phenomena during the pandemic highlight the fact that, without a keen recognition of the historical and ongoing exploitation of racialised bodies and collaborative approaches to addressing systemic marginalisation, cross-racial coalitions alone will not result in sustained change in racial justice.

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