

CHANNELING ENERGY, FOR FREEDOM FIGHTERS!

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There's big talk about healing lately. Since the enactment of the National Security Law in Hong Kong, the topic amounts to a moot point. Unlike childhood diaries, boyfriends, and sentimental reprises of sunrises, there are things that cannot be overcome. Not through sheer show of force or suppression or distraction, there is nothing that can replace our city. Yet the dream of Hong Kong will live on, and its relegation to a sleeping dream waiting for another moment of revolt and resurrection is precisely the wound that refuses suture. On the last day of rule under Basic Law, on the neon bright eve of Kowloon life, I received a Tarot reading on Temple Street. It was unlike me. It was also highly negative. I wanted to ask the fortune teller to tell me what would happen tomorrow, because tomorrow, what we could say and do that day would become illegal, seditious, signs of a traitor. Like James Baldwin once said to Audre Lorde: "We are behind the gates of a kingdom which is determined to destroy us."

The air hung heavy with spirits. The ways we were able to master the airwaves with our Telegram messages, WhatsApp notes, Airdropped protest paraphernalia on the subway, complex discussions on identity, inclusivity, and accessibility on LIHKG Forum were not able to overcome the larger spectre woven into the broken promises of the Sino-British Joint Declaration. Boey Wu of the Dream Walker Healing Studio told me of a rise in New Age practitioners in 2014 – the year Occupy Central rose and fell. Strikingly similar to the rise of New Age in the United States following internationalism, counterculture, and the pro-peace movements of the 1960s, it seemed to come from the aftershock of a sense of mass failure. As New Age continues its fall into disrepute overseas, a new following has grown in East Asia (though not to the full extent of its permeation into 1970s American society). Beginning with Chinese translations of seminal texts from Taiwan in the early 2000s, New Age began to offer not a way out, but a way in.

New Age has always been difficult to characterize, as modalities such as Akashic Record Reading, Reiki, Shamanism, Spiritual Response Therapy (SRT), Human Design, Angel readings, and so forth fall in and out of fashion. With all these modalities, energy is the primary material, and the binding factor in the harnessing of such modalities sets its sights on personal empowerment or individual power. As opposed to the more rigid and strict governmentality of organized religion, anybody can become a New Age healer and learn how to channel their psychic ability. Where some may call it intuition or ESP, New Age embraces a language of "light and love," seeing your body as a receptor that

can access or block different waves. In a way, these desires are shared by the protesters of Hong Kong, except the waves we so seek to access or block are mediated through a series of technical objects and platforms.

Last year, protesters sawed down newly installed traffic towers on suspicion that it actually housed facial recognition technology. They were right. Protesters continued to place cardboard boxes over towers in high-density zones, wear face masks, buy one-use subway tickets for themselves and leave behind others so as not to be tracked. Organizing took place on encrypted platforms such as Telegram and WhatsApp. Coded languages were invented, one of Cantonese slang rough-hewn into English characters and the other was hand gesture-based, used to indicate material needs for building barricades on site or request medical attention by volunteer first aid responders. Collectively developed applications sprung up to live-track police actions down to the minute and also map out safe houses. Another application was modified to delineate pro-democracy and pro-government establishments to keep the former businesses afloat. Many of them did better than they had in all their operating years.

Sociotechnical platforms became a site of politics, structuring activity, and allowing for different degrees of participation. The accessibility of participation – from sharing information online and designing posters to building frontline barricades and petitioning foreign politicians – kept the movement going strong and non-stop, much as the accessibility of New Age continually attracts new adherents. New Age situates the channeling of energy as a way to regain individual sovereignty or a form of one's rights, thus, harnessing said energy is a way the body becomes media platform. Prior to New Age, a similar Western import entered China by way of Japan. As Weihong Bao describes in *Fiery Cinema: The Emergence of an Affective Medium in China, 1915-1945*, in 1909, a group of overseas Chinese students formed the Chinese Mentalist Club, which was later renamed The Chinese Hypnotist School in 1911 following their relocation to Tokyo. By 1918, they had opened a Shanghai branch. Their activities feel like a media conglomerate today, spanning stage performances, festivals, publishing, and entertainment centres. In the 1920s, the pursuit of technological development was entangled with occultism, evading the technological determinism that is generally accepted today. The notion of the body as medium has existed time immemorial, but the pursuit of psychic ability in this way was and is tied to a different understanding of the body – as an information processor, not just as a spirit medium.

When Eyal Weizman co-chaired a closed conference at the Chinese University of Hong Kong last December, he said: “Hong Kong is the conflict of the future.” The Information Age has arrived – relatively evenly distributed – and the

ubiquitous connection allowed us to rehearse a new society. The still unnamed protests are affectionately called the Be Water Revolution, following Bruce Lee. To be water is to be fluid, to fight like hell when it means something, and to fade away when it doesn't. To be water is to enact forms of direct democracy such as staging a vote on LIHKG Forum on whether to continue an occupation in the airport and call more people in or abandon the site to avoid detention. To be water is to continually incorporate more supporters within and without our society. To be water is to exchange tactical training advice with protesters in Beirut and Catalonia. Whereas the internationalist movements of the 1960s were calibrated by a logic of exclusion, the Hong Kong movement produced a new way to do revolution. To be water is not just to be *anti*-government, but to be *pro* Hong Kong – to work out, as a group of people, how to be a group of people without top down governance. As Zeynep Tufekci reported in *The Atlantic*, the society we built during the protests enabled a rapid response to the coronavirus. Under a flailing government, people orchestrated their own forms of mutual aid and information vetting. Medics protested to pressure the government to close the border, and a collectively developed website sprung up to plot out the cases.

Despite my habituation to the velocity of Hong Kong life, my nose and ears have never settled in. They continue to itch and declare their presence with every shift in the humidity index. The first year I also suffered from insomnia. The hum of the city was at 50Hz, 10 lower than the standard in my former Montreal. Every surface to me was slick with moisture, sentient and vivaciously alive. I could smell the organisms in my bedroom, and was regulating my breath to theirs. I was victim to the rhythm of urban life, bumping down the street like a Roomba unable to conserve my energy. In "Information Fantasies," scholar Xiao Liu describes qigong fever and the preoccupation with extrasensory powers in 1980s post-socialist China. Information was "fantasized as a magic force" that would herald a new era. According to the New Age perspective, everyone has psychic ability, or the ability to perceive what is beyond the typically sensory. In one form of New Age healing called Vibratuning, one lightly strikes a piano tuning fork and applies it to different parts of the body to build resilience, and in a sense, reposition ones antennas.

The incorporation of the body into an information environment stems from an awareness of wireless technologies. Before the common understanding of New Age from the 1970s, New Agers in the 1940s and 50s were millenarianists, believing they were receiving transmissions from extraterrestrials, which would herald an actual New Age. In 1926 at Beijing University, a demonstration of the Belinograph was given. The Belinograph was an image transmission machine which relied on wireless current, but the machinic problem of how to synchronize the spinning disks persisted. To combat this, the spectator was

positioned as the tuning fork. Later, in a post-socialist China and post-colonial yet not independent Hong Kong, spectators or users continue to act as the tuning fork for their technical objects, continually adjusting their connectivity. As ambitious as the “information fantasies” of post-socialist China were, the ubiquity of wireless connection was enabled through the poor labour conditions of information workers such as those at Foxconn and other telecommunication giants. The psychic stage performers of early 1900s China have returned in the form of dramatized New Age demonstrations on Douyin (known abroad as TikTok).

In Hong Kong, New Age healers say: Think of your body as a receptor. Think of New Age practices as tools that help tune your body and allow you to channel energy. The metaphors and language used to describe New Age practices here assimilate spirits with information. In particular, Angel readings (quite popular now) are seen as direct lines to non-physical forms. The semiology of Tarot and Angel cards are strange transmutations of Christian iconography, with the back of the Angel card deck graced by Archangel Michael. Wu told me: “We live among angels, and they help us.” Any non-physical form can be called an angel. They are transcendental spirits that gain and transfer experiences. They are non-denominational and like ghosts, they exist to us as vibrations. And we may ask: What do my angels want me to know?

The feeling of walking with more than two million people or roughly 30% of the population washed over me, dragged me under the current, and propelled me into a groundless futurity. The power of the movement was not only in its physical manifestations but in its organizational capacity – from the physical body to the cybernetic one. Nameless and leaderless, the protests made a collective information body out of its participants. The body as a medium for information processing only became possible in high numbers, each body as a nodal point verifying information and passing it along. Anyone could participate, in however small or large ways, sustaining the movement over months of intensity only stymied by the outbreak of Covid-19. The energy channeled in this body morphed from hope to despair, from anger and resentment to euphoria. Channelling collective affect or energy became a critical modality of organizing, simultaneously regulatory of negative protest tactics and emancipatory in its organicity. Somewhat at odds with the focus on individualism in New Age, many practitioners retreated to meditation and healing, whereas others distanced themselves in order to fight in the movement. Cheuk Mei Li writes that in Hong Kong New Age, “Everyone is God.” She chalks up the focus on individualism in New Age as a sign of Hong Kong’s rampant neoliberalism, whereas a long-time local healer described popular New Age as a form of “spiritual suppression,” though continues to support the practice of individual modalities.

In the 1990s, New Age became popular in Hong Kong. As a Western import with no texts translated to Chinese at the time, it served an expat audience with libraries at the now-defunct The New Age Shop and The Age of Aquarius. Incidentally or fatalistically, the Age of Aquarius as an era is associated with electricity, computers, flight, democracy, freedom, idealism, and rebellion. By the 2000s, many books were translated to Chinese and there was an influx of new practitioners, making New Age more accessible as courses became inexpensive and centres popped up in different neighbourhoods. New Age assigns fate a relatively fixed position. Individual power and the channeling of positivity can manifest your desire in the material world but larger shifts such as those by the government are seen as naturalized and part of life's larger course. The above-mentioned spiritual suppression comes from this constant emphasis on positivity, even when that positivity eludes reality. As Olga Tokarczuk wrote in *Flights*, "There are two points of view in the world: the frog's perspective and the bird's eye view. Any point in between just leads to chaos."

In 2013, a stranger I interviewed told me, "Next year, they are going to Occupy Central." In my early morning in Montreal, my room flooded with white light. I could see his late evening apartment in Taipei through Skype. When the Occupation took hold, I thought about him, wondered why he told me that, and why I believed him. Then, I yearned to be in Hong Kong, and resisted an intense desire to make a transmission, however faint, a flash in the dark, to say 'I see you', 'I love you'. Hong Kongers are people of the diaspora. The territory is the first Chinatown, composed largely of those fleeing the regime that has now returned to occupy. As Rey Chow wrote in *Writing Diaspora* (1993), part of the goal is "to *unlearn* that submission to one's ethnicity such as 'Chineseness' as the ultimate signified even as one continues to support movements for democracy and human rights in China, Hong Kong, and elsewhere." The Be Water Revolution is not an anti-globalization movement, nor is it strictly a localist one. If New Age is about pushing one's body to open up to its full sensorium, then the protests did something to that effect as well. It isn't about who *are* Hong Kong people or what *is* Hong Kong, but as Elvia Wilk in "The Protests in Hong Kong" cites Byung-Chul Han, it is about "remain[ing] faithful to what is yet to come."

In the last hours of our two million people march, I lay down on Harcourt Road. Looking skyward, the hum of the city slowed to the tired breathing of the remaining. At midnight, the protest permit would expire and our communion would become illegal. A pastor came by, urging us to sing *Hallelujah* and pray – on the grounds that religious gatherings would still be legal come midnight. A petition was launched to excommunicate Chief Executive Carrie Lam from the church, since she said she had been "called by God to run for the post" and that

due to her actions, “a place has been reserved for [her] in Heaven.” Many churches became safe houses during the protests, with many Christian leaders campaigning against the now-repackaged extradition bill. Many of them now are facing prosecution. The ubiquitous connection and internet of things in Hong Kong is now being back-pedalled in the name of “National” security. The most prescient question asked in the wake of Occupy Central was: “What is a Hong Kong worth living for?” A call whose response began to be formulated in 2019, its answer will remain forever in the making as we redirect our transmissions toward our peers. With a private bounty out for those fleeing the country or committing seditious acts, the ‘reporting on your neighbours’ tactic of the Cultural Revolution has returned. As with undercover police officers, the threat is its destruction to community and trust. Our transmissions are at risk of being turned to fearful whispers, and yet, we continue our occupation of thin air.