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Opinion

National security law: Hong Kong's young crusaders should stand down to fight another day



- Political judgment takes time to mature. Up against the sledgehammer of a mandated national security law, the city's pro-democracy protesters should avoid confrontation with Beijing to win themselves the time and space to grow up

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Illustration: Craig Stephens

I wouldn't mind being 20-something again. That was about the only time in my life that I considered myself blunder-immune, and – as best as I can recall – the only time I felt sure I knew just about everything I'd ever need to know. Oh, were they the good old days!

Sometimes at 20-something, you do get things right. Consider the US invasion of Vietnam, for example. The truth was, president Lyndon Johnson made a terrible mistake.

At 20 or so, I wrote the first scorching anti-war editorial in my college newspaper. My political science professor, making fun of my bid for immortality, termed the editorial immature and naive. But on that one (and only that one) the kid was right, and the professor was wrong.

The risk with permitting “young adults” to decide important turns in our political and economic lives is that they may be right on some things, but they can't be right on everything – and maybe not even on most.

If they were, we could throw out the need for much of their costly higher education and ignore the findings of scientists who say that the brain does not reach processing maturity as quickly as young people think. So what are the odds they will get the big ones right?

Examples? Surely, we can all agree that the Chinese kids who power-punched the Cultural Revolution to paroxysms of insanity were not exactly mature decision-makers. And, surely, every candid reader provide an example, from their own household life, of judgments by the younger set they would wish never to become general public policy.



Chinese Red Guards, high school and university students waving copies of Mao Zedong's "Little Red Book" parade in Beijing in June 1966 at the start of the Cultural Revolution. Photo: AFP

Also, have you noticed that people do not necessarily get more stupid as they get older? Whether for the music composer or accomplished chef, it is fair to say that most types of craft take time to marinate.

Yes, the opera *Apollo et Hyacinthus* was put together when the composer was 11, but Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was, well, Mozart. Genius, which is of course rare by definition, is no function of age.

The immortal greats of Western philosophy were no spring chickens when their best thinking hatched. Thomas Hobbes was a sprightly 63 when his monumental *Leviathan* was published. Fiendishly clever Niccolo Machiavelli had not put it all together in *The Prince* until he was 44.

And Harvard's John Rawls was 50 when *A Theory of Justice* was published – and he kept revising his thoughts to get them as close to right as he possibly could for almost as long as he lived.

Proper political rule – whether in theorisation or practice – is not easy. A youthful age is no barrier to intelligence or even original insight, but it can be a substantial impediment to mature judgment.

Let's get down to a pressing example. The "elders" of Beijing have decided that eruptive Hong Kong cannot govern itself as planned and propose to intervene with "federal" legislation – a national security law passed by the National People's Congress Standing Committee.

This empowers the central government to decide whether someone in the special administrative region of the People's Republic of China needs to be extracted from civilian life and transferred to the mainland's judicial system.

Objections to the basic idea have been many and fierce – whether from crusty law professors to the greenest of the young crusaders. These 20-somethings deserve credit (says the West) for keeping the torch of democracy aflame; or deserve punishment (says Beijing) for roiling the placidity of the polity.

From a purely theoretical standpoint, the young crusaders and their older allies presumably hail more or less from the Rawls camp. Beijing and its allies pitch their tent with Hobbes, of course.

As for the local camp, the administration of Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor, it would have been helpful if it had possessed the behind-the-scenes political chops of a Machiavelli, so as to stay a few steps ahead of both sides, rather than a mile behind.

The two camps cannot be definitively bifurcated by age, to be sure; old as well as young populate both. But the spirit of each is mutually incompatible.

And both the huffy-stuffy British (gearing up only at the tail end of 156 years of colonisation as evangelical democracy missionaries) and holier-than-thou Americans have done little to inspire the hope of effective redemptive intervention.

Their bloviations have only served to steel the Xi Jinping administration in its jackhammer reversion to the option of a national security law.

And so Mother China has opted not to spare the rod on the spoiled children. Sucking the untameable spirit out of Hong Kong is, however, a risky business. Think about it: do we want Hong Kong to be no different from other similar-sized mainland cities? Is homogenisation the only way to press down on Hong Kong's perturbations?

I think I know the answer, but at the same time it's clearer than the waters of Victoria Harbour that Hong Kong's crusaders were not ready for the enormity of the mission on which they set forth.

But be not ashamed, crusaders: revert to a studious humility; stand down and avoid jail; give yourself time and space to grow up. Live to quarrel with Beijing another time. Martyrdom won't do anything for Hong Kong; but maturity and patience just might.

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