

Set & Setting: Security & Fieldwork in Hong Kong

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During the summer of 2022, the India China Institute at The New School graciously supported a research project I proposed that involved getting to know the intimacies of a post-protest, post-pandemic Hong Kong. Specifically, I was interested in subcultural groups who took part in the recent surge in popularity of psychedelic drugs for “mental health.” I sought out connections through individual local Hongkongers who seemed to take part in some kind of drug “culture,” if I may call it that. Before proposing this project, I had made contact with several psychedelic drug users/enthusiasts who also happened to be quite involved in the pro-democracy movements of 2014 and 2019 . Some of them expressed that their experiences with these substances assisted¹ them in releasing strong emotions associated with political issues, which became my main interest and concern. However, due to the legal ambiguity of my project, I will not be² presenting a detailed article. Instead, these pages contain some general remarks and takeaways from my few months in Hong Kong. By doing so I hope to protect their privacy as much as possible while Hong Kong transforms as rapidly as it is doing so now.

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Set and Setting. Before moving forward, a brief introduction to the field of psychedelic humanities and its relevance in my research is due. In the mid to late 20th century, psychedelic compounds such as LSD and mescaline were being tested for things from psychotherapy to military use. Timothy Leary, probably the most infamous supporter of psychedelic quietism³ urged the masses to “Turn on, Tune in, Drop out.” Basically, to

¹ Hong Kong has had a history of protests for civil liberties both before and after the Handover (1997). The 2019 protests which started as a populist movement against a bill that would allow offenders to be extradited to China, was more than the retaliation against a single law but a desire to retain the little autonomy remaining for Hongkongers. Most feared that extradition would extend to the outspoken members of society, such as the booksellers rumored to be kidnapped by government authorities within the past several years. The anti-extradition bill protests culminated in a national security law (2020) which further constrained the civil liberties of Hongkongers, putting an end to protest and pro-democratic activities for the foreseeable future. Beyond prohibiting physical demonstrations, the new law aims to reduce vague categories of dissidence including, “provoking by unlawful means hatred among Hong Kong residents towards the Central People’s Government or the Government of the Region, which is likely to cause serious consequences.”

² In no way did any of the participants of this study or I involve themselves in illegal acts. I simply was interested if psychedelic drugs in any way, shape, or form influenced the moral consciousness of Hongkongers in regards to how they think about their community as well as the events of the past couple of years.

³ A term used to describe a calm acceptance of things as they are in 17th century Christian mysticism. I use it here to describe claims of apoliticism. Bernard Faure (2010) writes extensively on Chinese Chan Buddhists and Quietism.

withdraw from politics. Multiple researchers have remarked on the influence of a 1960s psychedelic “counterculture” that not only changed the way we talk about ourselves (popularizing psychological discourse and emphasis on the self), but quickly became a neoliberal consumer culture.

Now that psychedelic drugs have made their way back into the limelight for the past couple of years, we have to consider the global impact of advocacy for such diverse substances⁴ as medicine. In her 2019 book *Anxious China: Psychotherapy and the politics of Inner Revolution*, UC Davis anthropologist, Li Zhang, greatly details how Western style psychotherapy aids toward what she calls an “inner revolution” that is necessary when a country like China goes through large scale social and economic changes. For example, the individualizing aspect and self-centric nature of psychological care aids in the transition from a socialist government to one based more on neoliberal values such as the entrepreneurship of the self, shifting the responsibility of problems away from the community level and toward the individual level. This made me think deeper about the cultural translation of what James Nolan terms the American “therapeutic culture,”⁵ and if it has an effect on Hongkongers who use psychedelics that, in contemporary discourse, are being popularized at the moment for treating PTSD, depression, anxiety, and other mental health conditions.

In psychedelic discourse, this is called “set and setting:” researchers claim that mindset, culture, and social circumstances entirely dictate the phenomenological experience of taking a psychedelic drug. In the case of my research, I went to investigate how much of an impact the individualizing nature of psychological talk effected how Hongkongers felt about their political circumstances and moral worldview.

Notes from the field. The language⁶ that many of the people I interviewed use to describe their experiences is reminiscent of the American therapeutic culture and the contemporary discussion around hallucinogens as medicines for mental illness. However, there was also a deep link to a Southeast Chinese Buddhist tradition that was used to describe experiences, similar to the psychedelic discourse of the 1960s. Just to clarify, this is not a statistically big number, I was simply interested in taking a few individual reports as examples or insights to other philosophical concepts. Individuals who were surprisingly more relaxed about their political circumstance than they were a couple of years ago prompted my interest in whether the surrounding culture (and

⁴ To note, there are currently over 600 startups getting ready for legalization as well as many notable documentaries on streaming sites on the therapeutic effects of psychedelic drugs. See *How to Change Your Mind*, *Fantastic Fungi*, Gwyneth Paltrow’s *Goop Lab* on Netflix.

⁵ Nolan posits in the first chapter of *The Therapeutic State* that American psychology has infiltrated everyday life so much that it changes the way we think and talk about daily happenings. He posits that therapists and psychological professionals have come to replace priests and clergymen.

⁶ For example, negatively impactful events such as being at the frontlines of an anti-government protest was described by one as “traumatizing,” which is a vocabulary that would probably have been seldom used before exposure to literature surrounding mental health.

subsequent political history) around psychedelic drugs or perhaps the pharmacological qualities of the drugs themselves promote a sort of “quietism” as opposed to activism.⁷

It seemed to me that the tight restrictions Hong Kong was put under after the protest and during the pandemic, such as sensitivity around free speech, banning of mass gathering, vaccine passports in and out of every establishment, and long quarantines in and out of the city, turned many young people’s revolutionary spirit inwards. I mean, not only are Hongkongers more open to and interested subjects like psychology, philosophy, and psychedelic drugs, but there is a greater focus on inner change than outer change. For example, media outlets that create a communal discussion around philosophy such as Corrupt the Youth have gained popularity. Among those that I spoke to their is a need to “get out of the loop” that is daily life in Hong Kong—which is usually characterized as stagnant and boring according to most that don’t have the option nor means to leave the region.

I spent most of my time with local Hong Kong Chinese people, but I did happen to interview one or two Westerners that were interested in psychedelics and lived in Hong Kong. One of them was a breathwork teacher that specialized in trying to induce altered states of consciousness by manipulating breathing. He informed me that, because of the pandemic, more and more people have been flocking to alternative techniques of understanding themselves. A lot of the people that take his classes are other Western expatriates who find it helps them become more productive in their busy lives in Hong Kong. As I was interested in the diversity of psychedelic experience, the desire for expats to alter consciousness and Hongkongers to alter consciousness was similar but different in many ways. Similar, because it seems like, for locals, many of them became more focused on themselves rather than traditional familial obligations after sessions with LSD. Different, because Hongkongers were not so focused on boosting productivity, but boosting their personalities and engaging in their communities.

Collectively, the group of Hongkongers I spent most of my time with seemed to find deeper appreciation in each other than they claim to have before. If I was to investigate their social dynamics further, I would have liked to study how friend-friend relationships of traditional Confucian philosophy have any implication, if any, on Hongkongers in these circumstances. I also would have liked to study local Buddhist cultures much more closely in contrast with the “California Zen” of American psychedelia. As for my investigation into psychedelic induced quietism, I don’t think that Hongkongers have become apolitical. Only that they may have come to accept the unchangeability of political circumstances through a deeper appreciation of the communities they are a part of. For their privacy, I will not go into further detail of their political opinions.

⁷ Two journal articles from ACS Pharmacology & Transnational Science present conflicting views as to whether the subjective effects (the phenomenological effect of the drugs) of psychedelic drugs are or are not necessary for therapeutic effects (Olson, 2021; Yaden and Griffiths, 2021). This is an example of a much larger debate in the field of psychedelic research as to whether there are innate and standardized factors that come from substances that are said to be highly dependent on “set” and “setting.”

Security and pandemic. Ironically, being in Hong Kong and doing this research provoked more anxiety and fear than I had thought it would. Throughout the entirety of the trip, I was overly conscious of my computer hard drive being leaked (even though it contained no illegal information) and my research being mistaken for political action. My entrance into the city of Hong Kong, which included over 20 Covid tests and a 7-day quarantine in a designated hotel, really made an impression of how much the government has cracked down on security since 2019. Most young Hongkongers I talked to were highly skeptical of the need for vaccine passports that tracked one's location into all and any local businesses, as well as the crowd control rules and other pandemic related regulations. Following, my project was never able to attain IRB ethics approval as the committee could not decide whether talking to people about drugs was illegal or not.

I initially planned to reach out to more people, record audio interviews, and turn this into a bigger project about the cultural translation (or transduction) of psychology, morality, and global politics in general. However, the anxiety that Hong Kong's security provoked in me made me much more weary of talking to people or writing about them. Instead of recording interviews, I kept handwritten notes that did not include nearly as much detail as I wanted them to. I ended up only reaching out to a limited group of people for fear of being misinterpreted or endangering other participants that were connected with me.