

Waldorf Around the World in the Time of COVID-19: Hong Kong

— Louise deForest

Hong Kong is an interesting place to know about for several reasons. I have visited Hong Kong several times and, much to my amazement, have fallen in love with the city and the people. In spite of being a big city, it is beautiful with extraordinary architecture, full of friendly people within a very diverse population, and presents the beauty of nature all around. I have close friends there who pour out to me their fears and hopes for their beloved city and the five Waldorf Schools scattered throughout. Here is a sharing of the viewpoint of these friends. They are young people in their thirties and forties, all native to Hong Kong, who are raising their families and starting Waldorf schools in the midst of this pandemic and political and social unrest in their country.

In November, 2019, people heard of a type of pneumonia in China that had never been seen before. Immediately Hong Kong residents were on high alert. Hong Kong had had the experience of

SARS being transmitted from mainland China in 2003, so many medical personnel recommended closing the borders immediately; but the Chinese government denied any danger. Just in case, people began to hoard essential food and non-food items. Soon store shelves and markets began to be bare, as we saw here in the US also.

At the end of January, the night before the Chinese New Year, news came that Wuhan had been closed. Soon the first cases of this new illness began to arrive from China. Travelers from China and their friends were immediately isolated, though the government allowed the borders to still remain open. There were initially few local cases of COVID, but the crossover between China and Hong Kong is very active. More cases arrived every day. Schools were all closed. Parents still went to work, yet, encouragingly, the number of infections fell.

Then in March came a second wave of COVID, stemming from the fact that restaurants, gyms, and stores had remained open. The government then closed all but the essential businesses and announced social distancing policies. No more than four people could gather at a time. This stopped the spread of infections. Within the month there were no new cases, and the rules relaxed. Flight personnel, merchants from China, and the shipping industry, all received exemptions from testing and quarantine. This led to the third wave of COVID in July. New cases spread, especially among the elderly; and there were more than 100 new cases in Hong Kong every day (now, in August, at the time of this writing, it is down to about 70 new cases a day).

The restrictions have become even more severe, with all schools, restaurants and other non-essential businesses once again closed and a limit to only two people allowed together at a time.

As may be remembered, last year the movement for independence from China became a very active yet highly disciplined protest movement in Hong Kong. Hundreds of people were demonstrating evenings and every weekend. The country has divided into two factions. There are those who oppose both local and Chinese centralized governments, who are in the majority. The other faction is those who support the current governmental structure. The Chinese government, since the pandemic erupted in Hong Kong, has become much more controlling of the region, under the excuse of protecting the population. Now all forms of media are being increasingly controlled by the censors in China. One friend suggested that in the Hong Kong COVID situation, the oppression and human rights violations that are happening in the name of protection are worse the illness itself.

As mentioned before, schools re-opened for only a month—first the international schools opened, followed by mainstream upper grades and then the lower grades classes. Kindergartners were still asked to stay at home. All schools have been closed for the summer (except several small

Waldorf programs), and it is predicted that all classes will be online when the new school year begins. However, the government has said that if parents need to send their children to school, the school has to accept them. This leads many to question whether the government is genuinely concerned with the health and safety of the children and teachers. Likewise, keeping the general social distancing in place serves to cut down on the social and political unrest.

The demonstrations are still happening in pop-up events around the city. Police use force, even violence and tear gas, to break them up protest demonstrations. Pro-government people, however, can have rallies and demonstrations whenever and wherever they want while police turn a blind eye. Leaders of the independence movement have slowly disappeared. They have either been arrested by the police or emigrated to another country. Recently, the last newspaper to publish impartial news was raided by over 200 policemen, the executives were all imprisoned, and everything was confiscated.

Some people have been able to work from home, but the majority of people continue their usual commutes and jobs. There has been no financial support for those who have lost their livelihoods, and most parents have to work. This leaves their children mostly in the care of grandparents; unable to go outside (all public parks, beaches and recreational centers are closed) or play with others, the children spend their waking hours watching media. Other parents who are able to stay home say that being with their children for 24 hours a day is too much. Parents struggle to find healthy ways to respond to their children's behavior and to put supportive rhythms in place.

A few Waldorf early childhood programs remain open, but it is risky and difficult for teachers to navigate regulations. Children now run to the teacher to tell on someone who is not wearing a mask (and children as young as two months old can be seen wearing masks). When children play imitative games, no one wants to be the policemen, who are seen as being evil. Everywhere

it is seen that children are increasingly anxious, high-strung, frightened, and craving movement. Parents, too, are traumatized by the politically divided population, often within the same family. People explode aggressively and often violently at the least provocation. As one person said, “It seems that the worst is not the worst every day, as we find something worse happening the next.”

Teachers there strive to remain positive and to protect the children as much as they are able. As

one Waldorf teacher wrote: “I pray every day and hope the situation of fragmentation would be at ease and wish less people lost their jobs and that life could be back to normal soon—even though it seems impossible. But these are our times. If I can just maintain calmness of soul, I may be able to help the children and get through these times of not knowing anything.” ♦