

The lawyers, doctors and artists behind the Hong Kong protests

The FT speaks to professionals risking their jobs to help from beyond the front line



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Nicolle Liu, Sue-Lin Wong and Alice Woodhouse in Hong Kong SEPTEMBER 30 2019

For the past three months in Hong Kong, the government has been waiting for public sentiment to turn against [pro-democracy protests](#) that have plunged the territory into its worst political crisis in decades. Yet each time the more radical frontline protesters escalate their use of violence, the more moderate demonstrators remain supportive, turning to slogans of the movement including “We fight on, each in our own way”.

This [past weekend](#) was no different. Tens of thousands of peaceful demonstrators staged rallies as protesters hurled petrol bombs at police firing water cannons and tear gas, and arresting at least 100 demonstrators. Mass protests are also expected across the territory to coincide with the 70th anniversary of communist rule in China on October 1.

“Never in Hong Kong’s history have you seen so many different professional groups or identities and social roles coming out to protest,” said Samson Yuen, a political scientist at Lingnan University in Hong Kong.

However, many professionals, including lawyers, doctors and accountants, feel unable to join the front line, fearing that they could be charged with a criminal offence for participating in an unauthorised assembly. Providing services is a way round this challenge.

The Financial Times spoke to a [wide range of individuals](#) who are using their skills and knowledge to support a movement that has caught both the Hong Kong government and Beijing by surprise for its durability and broad support among moderate sections of Hong Kong society.

The lawyers

‘It’s self-defence against an unjust system’



Lawyer Angeline Chan provides pro bono legal assistance to arrested protesters



Riot police officers confront anti-government protesters

On the front lines, protesters often stamp their lawyers' phone number on their wrists, using hairspray to prevent it from smudging. They do this so that if they are apprehended — more than 1,500 have been arrested since June — they know whom to call.

Help comes from lawyers such as Angeline Chan, who show up bleary-eyed to police stations across the territory after a night of violent protests, to meet clients.

Ms Chan says about 200 Hong Kong lawyers provide pro bono legal assistance to arrested protesters, adding that law students have scrambled to sign up to help since the protests started.



Crowdfunding campaigns were used to buy advertisements in international media

Supporting the movement is risky, explains another lawyer who preferred to remain anonymous.

“Because of what I do, I can’t get convicted of any criminal offence including unauthorised assembly so I can’t really stand on the front line with them,” the barrister said, choosing instead to provide legal aid and donate money to the movement.

“It’s self-defence against an unjust system and systematic and institutional violence,” he said.

The finance professionals

‘I use my influence and connections’

One banker in his 30s describes himself as “originally quite politically apathetic”. But that changed in early August, when he started a Facebook page to encourage colleagues in the financial services industry to support the protests. The page now has more than 85,000 followers and the banker says he has donated more than HK\$500,000 (\$63,765) to the movement.

“I use my influence and connections to tell people around me what is happening. It doesn’t sound very original but it is useful,” he said, adding that about 70-80 per cent of his friends support the movement but prefer to donate money rather than being vocal.



One accountant, who asked to remain anonymous, prepares financial statements for the movement’s online crowdfunding campaigns



A banker set up this Facebook page to encourage finance professionals to support the pro-democracy protests. It has more than 85,000 followers

Hong Kong's crowdfunding campaigns have raised about \$15m since the start of the protests in June. After a weekend of violence last month, people donated \$1m within an hour to buy advertisements in international newspapers in a bid to raise awareness of what protesters said was growing police brutality. A separate "612 Humanitarian Relief Fund" that helps protesters with legal fees and medical bills has raised nearly \$10m.

An accountant who was a member of a six-person accounting team says he ensures the financial statements underpinning the campaign are properly done.

"People have a right to know how their donations are being used and, as an accountant, I am able to help present the crowd-funded accounts professionally to the public," he said.

The medical staff

‘With greater power comes more responsibility’

At almost every protest in Hong Kong, volunteer teams of doctors, nurses, medics and social workers don their yellow vests marked with red crosses and stand by, ready to provide medical care and psychological assistance to protesters hit by tear gas, pepper spray and rubber bullets.

“We have a lot of privilege in our society as healthcare professionals and with greater power comes more responsibility,” said Alfred Wong, a cardiologist at a public hospital and spokesman for Médecins Inspirés, a group of pro-democracy medical staff.



‘With great power comes more responsibility,’ Alfred Wong, cardiologist and spokesman for a group of pro-democracy medical professionals



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Doctors and nurses at Prince of Wales Hospital sing the Hong Kong protest anthem during a demonstration earlier this month © Carl Court/Getty Images

Teams of medical volunteers also run hotlines and provide consultation services to protesters who are afraid to seek medical help through Hong Kong's healthcare system. Dr Wong says reports that police have entered hospitals to access patients' confidential information to make arrests was a particular cause of concern for protesters.

Rebecca Lam, a 29-year-old social worker, helps protesters process their emotional distress. "I sometimes go to the front line and talk to people who are preparing themselves to be arrested or beaten by the police," she said. "We just listen to their stories and we try to help them see what's ahead of them so they can be more prepared."

The creatives

‘We’ve finally got the chance to do something’



Venus, a graphic designer, stands in front a wall from which anti-government posters have been removed



Venus produces illustrations in support of the pro-democracy movement

“As a creator, I feel obliged to join the movement and help people with things that I am good at,” said Venus, a 28-year-old graphic designer who draws illustrations of the protests.

The FT interviewed illustrators, graphic designers, animators, musicians, sculptors, artists and videographers, who all said they were motivated to make art to boost morale among the protesters.



Posters designed by volunteer artists shared in the messaging app Telegram that advertise upcoming demonstrations

T, a professional musician, is the composer of “Glory to Hong Kong”, an unofficial anthem of the protests that has been sung by thousands in public spaces including shopping centres. T invited protesters to help finesse the lyrics and a [video](#) of the song has been viewed 1.8m times on YouTube.

“Hong Kong people are buying safety equipment like helmets and gloves for the protesters,” T said. “As a musician I think I can also buy them these things to protect them from physical attacks. But maybe I can do something more, I can do something spiritually to solidify their will. And ideas, they’re bulletproof.”

“We feel like we haven’t been doing anything,” said the videographer behind the video. “But now we’ve finally got the chance to do something for the community.”

‘The very last line of resistance’

Far from the front lines, a disparate group of professionals including computer programmers and construction sector workers are also supporting the protesters.

Pro-democracy advocates who work in the building industry help surreptitiously to bulk buy supplies for frontline protesters such as helmets, goggles and masks whose procurement in Hong Kong has become ever more difficult. They also assist by testing materials so that protesters are best able to protect themselves against the police.

“We tried wooden shields but they don’t stop rubber bullets and are easily broken by police batons, plus wood is too heavy. So now we’re testing whether PV boards and aluminium make better homemade shields,” said one construction worker.



Protesters use homemade shields to protect themselves against police



Three programmers interviewed by the FT described products they had created to support the movement, including a database of the political affiliations of candidates standing in forthcoming district council elections. The programmers also built bots for Telegram, a messaging app used by the protesters, to search for shops and restaurants that support the movement that they can frequent.

“There are all kinds of front liners [in the movement] . . . but my ability to contribute is limited,” said a programmer who created a website that scrapes data on the protests from news websites. “I see myself in a supporting role. Sitting here behind my computer, I’m the very last line of resistance.”

Photographs by Miguel Candela for the Financial Times

Produced by Claire Manibog, Kari-Ruth Pedersen and Adrienne Klasa

