How one fighter made his escape from the worst battle of Hong Kong's protests

Suzanne Sataline November 30, 2019



Reuters/Tyrone Siu

The young man in black climbed down the manhole's footholds and flicked on a penlight. The tunnel offered enough space for his narrow shoulders and slim backpack, but he could not stand. He would have to duck walk, feet wide, body hunched. Soon, the squalid sea water that runs beneath Hong Kong's streets sloshed around his knees.

Mud encircled his ankles. When his hand brushed the concrete wall, a carpet of cockroaches rustled.

Alone in that dark filth he put his faith in a few things: That a sewer was better than a campus filled with bombs. That two people would remember to lift the heavy iron cover at his journey's end. That the escape planned by dozens of strangers would not end in a prison cell.

Three months before he climbed into that culvert, I met Lee at a sleepy protest in Tai Po, a district in Hong Kong's vast northern stretch called the New Territories. He asked that I not disclose his full name for this article. We chatted about the standoff with police, and then followed the protesters to another district. I lost him in the crowd, just before the police doused everyone in tear gas; we stayed in touch since.

A nervous nerd in his 20s, Lee built spreadsheets during the week and roadblocks on the weekend, as he tried to live his radical ideas while living with a sickly parent in a working-class home. For years, he had chafed under his parents' beliefs. His father is a patriot whose mobile phone ringtone blares "March of the Volunteers," China's national anthem. Over the nearly six months that the Hong Kong government rebuffed its citizens' demands—first over a bill that would have weakened Hong Kong's judicial independence, then for democratic freedoms—Lee became convinced that this was

his hometown's last chance to stand up to Beijing. A proper revolution would ensure Hong Kong's autonomy and rights.

Those ideals convinced him to guard the bridge at the entrance to the Chinese University of Hong Kong, or CUHK, on Nov. 12, where dozens of people fought rubber bullets with petrol bombs to push police back. It's why he joined thousands of people at Hong Kong Polytechnic University, or Poly, to fight police there, too. Neither was his alma mater. "If you don't stand up" for others, he said, "no one will stand for you."

He arrived before police sealed off Poly on Nov. 17 and started hammering protesters with tear gas, rubber bullets, and stinging blue dye from a water cannon. Young people lobbed back liquid petroleum gas canisters strapped to Molotovs, creating huge fireballs. Officials warned that anyone who stayed on campus would be arrested and charged with rioting. Inside, teenagers began to cry. First-aid volunteers began to pack up. Police made hundreds of arrests, but Lee remained adamant he wouldn't surrender.

"Many people feel this is a war," said another protester who was there, "In a war, you don't surrender to your enemy."

"Enemies of the people"

After Hong Kong's last mass protests, the Umbrella

Movement in 2014, the government prosecuted many people who had encouraged the street occupation that demanded Beijing allow democratic elections for the city's leader; several were sent to prison. The government also imprisoned other democracy figures such as Edward Leung, whose 2016 campaign slogan—Reclaim Hong Kong! Revolution of our Times!—became the rallying cry of this year's protests. People were already angry with Beijing for failing to deliver on its promise of a democratic vote; the prosecutions further embittered many. Protesters also learned from their setbacks. This time around, no visible leaders have surfaced for the government to target. To protect themselves, protesters wear masks to hide from police and cameras.

On protest days, young people pack as if going on vacation. There are outfits for protest and outfits for escape. The latter are in light shades, which might let the wearer slip past police. Shoes must be switched. Water cannon dye leaves skin blue, and soles, too. Protesters frequently change their phone numbers and identities on social media. They do not ask the names of the people who stand beside them. When a teammate is arrested, many squads delete message channels and cut ties with the unfortunate. An arrest is an opening into which the police can creep.

Many protesters have been cautious, and yet, police have

arrested about 5,800 people since June, some just for being on the wrong patch of road at the wrong time. As violence surged over more than five months, with protesters meeting rubber bullets with weapons of their own, the government came to see many of Hong Kong's youngest as a threat. At a press briefing this month, Hong Kong chief executive Carrie Lam called demonstrators "enemies of the people."

Protesters say they are defending themselves against a police force that routinely uses excessive force against them. Lee hurled his first Molotov on Oct. 1, the birthday of Communist-ruled China, when the city erupted in a "day of mourning," and one teenage protester was shot. Lee was throwing rocks that day in the working-class district of Wong Tai Sin when a young man collapsed near him during a hail of rubber bullets. With others, Lee helped carry the man to medical help, and then took aim with a flaming bottle.

Arrests have picked up pace since October. The young have been rounded up on street corners, searched at their housing estates, and chased on college running tracks and in shopping malls. Many are released after officers record their details, but the protesters don't know if or when they will be charged. There is no deadline to prosecute for many offenses in Hong Kong. Since June, police have charged more than 920 people with a host of offenses; the most

contentious, rioting, carries a sentence up to 10 years.

Reuters/Thomas Peter

Riot police detained a protester in August.

The government has said protesters at Poly staged a riot, bombarding police with petrol bombs, bricks, even arrows. More than 1,300 people were arrested there by the time the siege finally ended on Friday (Nov. 29). In the final days, college staff searched for holdouts, and were followed by officers who collected bottles filled with kerosene and dusted surfaces for fingerprints. Officials have reserved the right to take legal action later against people whom police didn't immediately arrest.

Yu, a college undergraduate, decided to leave Poly last Thursday (Nov. 21), fearing that a burn from a tear gas shell was infected. Before she climbed into the ambulance, police snapped a photo of her holding her ID. "Like we are criminals," she messaged.

An escape planned by strangers

HK01/Handout via Reuters

Nov. 18: Protesters tried to escape Poly by shimmying down to a highway, but some were caught.

After the battle ended at CUHK, protesters flocked to Poly, fearful that police would go after it next. Protesters had

blocked a pedestrian bridge and entrances to the Cross-Harbour Tunnel, a vital link between Kowloon and Hong Kong Island. Many Poly students and graduates disagreed strongly with occupying the campus, but they were overruled.

With police blocking the barricaded exits, and grabbing those who tried to sneak out, Lee waited for an opportunity to leave.

Poly turned into a guerrilla war college. Crews excavated paving stones and practiced flinging them in slingshots rigged from helmets, rubber cords and weight room benches. On a plaza, dozens of people mixed explosive formulas of kerosene, flour, and sugar. One young woman devised her own concoction using red oil-based paint and lighter fluid filled to the necks of Coke bottles. “Don’t share the recipe,” she warned sternly before tossing a flaming sample into the drained 50-meter pool. Her Jackson Pollock splash burned for more than 100 seconds.

When police moved in on Nov. 17, Lee carried Molotovs to the front line and threw some himself. When officers drove an armored van toward the first barricade, the protesters fire-bombed it. Lee remembers that as the siege’s last glorious moment. The time after was a long, painful defeat, but the depleted frontline kept at it for hours. “Even a pig, before it is slaughtered, will scream,” he said days later.

Lee joined a large group that tried to break out the next morning. Police snagged dozens of people, as he and others fled back. Their brick fortress was now a prison stocked with explosives. Molotovs littered the canteen, perched on ledges, cluttered the gym where people curled up on yoga mats.



Reuters/Leah Millis

Nov. 23: A protester who called himself "Riot Chef," and who said he was a volunteer cook for protesters at Poly, smoked out of the side of his gas mask.

Lee had arrived without friends and was nervous about trusting strangers who remained. Word went around that undercover police were in their midst. He scrounged for a sleeping bag and bedded down in a windowless tutoring

office. At night, he foraged for food. The campus 7-11 had been ransacked and he kept his stash of crackers, Oreos, and cups of dried noodle soup in a small cardboard box. Friends kept checking on him. He'd awake to find 20 missed calls. "They care for me more than I care for myself," he said.

That's when protesters began to pull manhole covers from over the drainage tunnels. Poly was lined with underground passages. Lee made a practice run, stepping into the hole and checking the water level. His friends guided him to Telegram groups where people shared images of city drainage maps. Strangers reviewed routes, and advised Lee that it would be safest to leave around noon, when the tide would sweep out and water would be lowest.

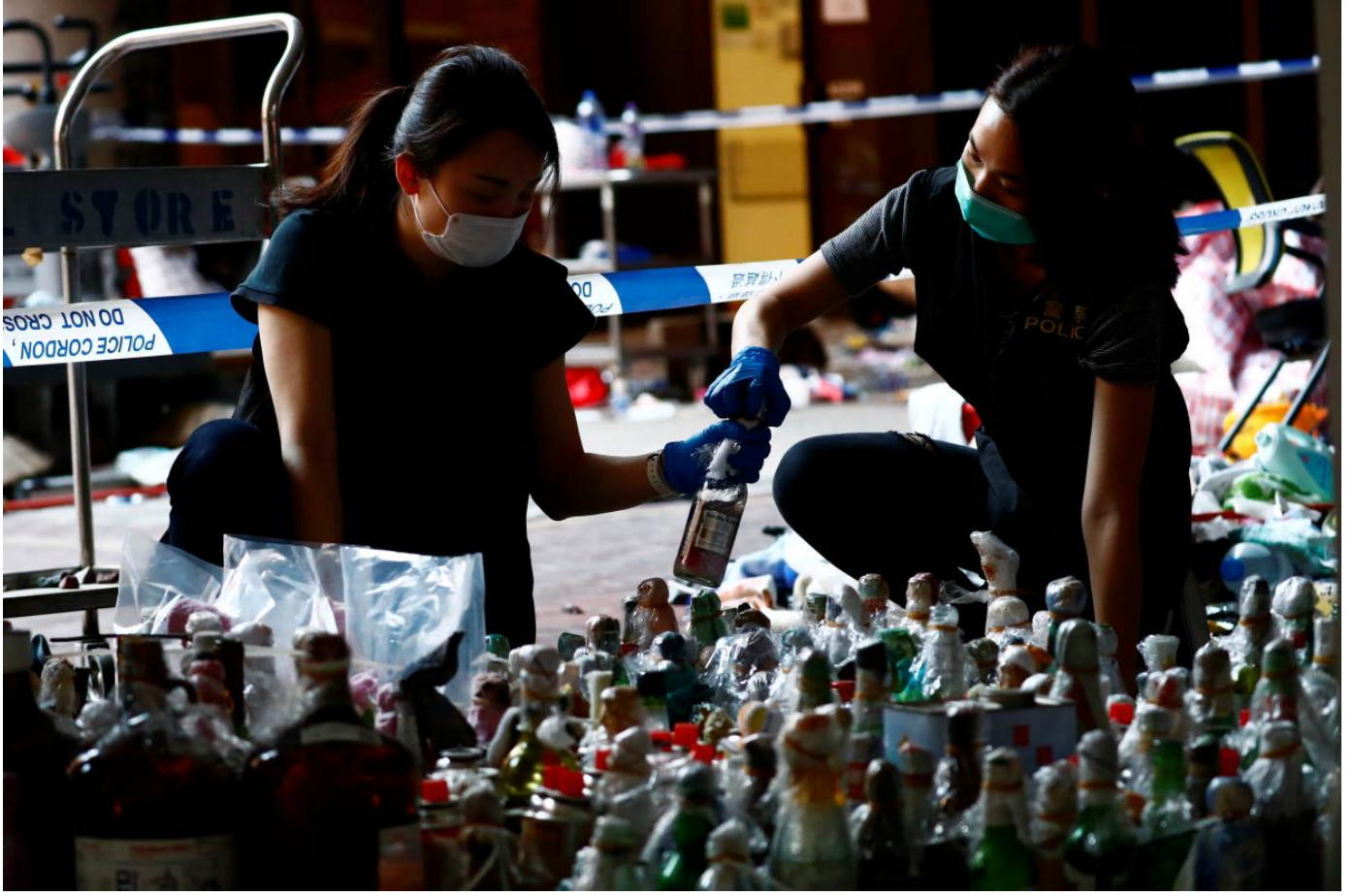
The strangers arranged escapees in groups. His would leave Nov. 22 from W Core, a building on the northern side of campus. At the last moment someone texted Lee: pull out. That tunnel would take him to a wide, open street, and undercover police were guarding that exit hole. His correspondents directed him to a tunnel in the campus center instead. Inside, there were two choices: turning left would lead toward the residential district called Whampoa. He chose to go right, to a Hung Hom road along the harbor.

For his journey, Lee dressed like an action figure, the hood of his black windbreaker pulled tight. He wore his gas mask.

Inside, the roaches were extremely large, like nothing he'd seen on sidewalks. He told himself this was a good sign. If there was gas, he thought, they'd be dead. When he touched the wall to steady himself, he'd kill a few.

The mud slowed him, and he stopped often to rest. Voices from the street trickled through the open manholes, and he crossed under them cautiously. There was no signal down there. Mostly, he tried not to think. "The tunnel can't hear you," he said.

Lee kept walking, toward a crack of light that signaled his exit. He had once tried to push open a manhole cover from inside the hole, but his scrawny arms couldn't shoulder the weight. Two strangers were supposed to be on the other end to help. Light streamed into the tunnel, and he smelled the harbor breeze. Someone had opened the manhole cover. Someone stood watch. Someone drove him home. It was an operation of someones. Finding all of them to thank would be, he said, dangerous.



Reuters/Thomas Peter

Nov. 28: Police officers gathered evidence at the campus of the Polytechnic University on Thursday.