

# WHO'S AFRAID OF NATHAN LAW?

A FILM BY JOE PISCATELLA



POV

DISCUSSION GUIDE







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# Film Summary



At 21, he was a leader of Hong Kong's Umbrella Revolution. By 23, he became Hong Kong's youngest elected lawmaker. At 26, he was Most Wanted under the National Security Law. *Who's Afraid of Nathan Law?* offers a close look at the city's most famous dissident to uncover what happens to freedom when an authoritarian power goes unchecked.

# Using This Guide

This guide is an invitation to dialogue. It is based on a belief in the power of human connection and designed for people who want to use *Who's Afraid of Nathan Law?* to engage family, friends, classmates, colleagues, and communities. In contrast to initiatives that foster debates in which participants try to convince others that they are right, this document envisions conversations undertaken in a spirit of openness in which people try to understand one another and expand their thinking by sharing viewpoints and listening actively.

The discussion prompts are intentionally crafted to help a wide range of audiences think more deeply about the issues in the film. Rather than attempting to address them all, choose one or two that best meet your needs and interests. And be sure to leave time to consider taking action. Planning next steps can help people leave the room feeling energized and optimistic, even in instances when conversations have been difficult.

For more detailed event planning and facilitation tips, visit <https://communitynetwork.amdoc.org/>



## A NOTE TO FACILITATORS

Dear POV Community,

We are so glad you have chosen to facilitate a discussion inspired by the film *Who's Afraid of Nathan Law?* Before you facilitate, please prepare yourself for the conversation, as this film invites you and your community to discuss experiences of political dissidents, youth activism, the fight for autonomy under oppression, and the broader political landscapes that shape these struggles. These conversations require learning truths about society, culture, and political motivations that typically have not been taught in schools. We urge you, as a facilitator, to take the necessary steps to ensure that you are prepared to guide a conversation that prioritizes the well-being and safety of the youth in your community, as well as those affected by political oppression. Importantly, this film shares experiences through a lens of resilience, rather than focusing on trauma, and we hope this guide will aid you in conversations that expand understanding while maximizing care, critical curiosity, transformation, and connection.

### Tips and Tools for Facilitators

Here are some supports to help you prepare for facilitating a conversation that inspires curiosity, connection, critical questions, recognition of difference, power, and possibility.

## Share Community Agreements

### Community Agreements: What Are They? Why Are They Useful?

Community agreements help provide a framework for engaging in dialogue that establishes a shared sense of intention ahead of participating in discussion. Community agreements can be co-constructed and created as an opening activity that your group completes collectively and collaboratively. [Here is a model](#) of community agreements you can review. As the facilitator, you can gauge how long your group should take to form these agreements or whether participants would be amenable to using pre-established community agreements.

### Opening Activity (Optional): Establishing Community Agreements for Discussion

Whether you are a group of people coming together once for this screening and discussion or a group whose members know each other well, creating a set of community agreements helps foster clear discussion in a manner that draws in and respects all participants, especially when tackling intimate or complex conversations around identity. These steps will help provide guidelines for the process:

- **Pass around** sample community agreements and take time to read aloud as a group to make sure all participants can both hear and read the text.
- **Allow time** for clarifying questions, make sure all participants understand the necessity for the agreements, and allow time to make sure everyone understands the agreements themselves.
- **Go around in a circle** and have every participant name an agreement they would like to include. Chart this in front of the room where all can see.
- **Go around two to three times** to give participants multiple chances to contribute and also to give a conclusive end to the process.
- **Read the list aloud.**
- **Invite** questions or revisions.
- **Ask** if all are satisfied with the list.



## COMMON CONCEPTS AND LANGUAGE

### Chief Executive

Hong Kong's Chief Executive is the head of Hong Kong and is responsible for leading the government and overseeing legislation. The Chief Executive is elected by a 1,500-member Election Committee, which is composed mainly of pro-Beijing members from various sectors, including business, professional groups, and political bodies. The candidate must receive more than half of the votes from this committee to be elected. While there is a demand for universal suffrage, the current system is heavily influenced by Beijing, which has the final say on the eligibility of the candidates and the election process.

### Civil Disobedience

Civil disobedience is a form of nonviolent protest where participants deliberately break certain laws and regulations to demonstrate against injustice or to advocate for political or social change. In Hong Kong's democracy movement, civil disobedience has been a critical tactic used by protestors to challenge laws and actions that they see as undermining their rights and freedoms. Civil disobedience often involves sit-ins, occupying government buildings, and peacefully blocking access to infrastructure, aiming to disrupt the status quo to draw attention to their cause and put pressure on authorities to engage in dialogue and reform. During the 2014 Umbrella Movement, thousands of demonstrators occupied major roads and public spaces in defiance of police orders to demand universal suffrage.

### Exile

Exile, the state of being barred from one's native country for political or punitive reasons, has become a significant reality for many Hong Kong protestors in the wake of the National Security Law. For these protestors, exile means leaving behind their home, family, and community to avoid arrest, imprisonment, or worse, for their involvement in pro-democracy activities or expressions of dissent. Many prominent activists have fled to countries like the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, and Taiwan, seeking asylum and continuing their advocacy from abroad. Exile is both a personal sacrifice and a strategic move to keep the movement's message alive internationally, despite the risks of being separated indefinitely from their home.

### Frontliners

Frontline protestors, also known as frontliners, in Hong Kong's 2019 anti-extradition protests, were a group of mostly young activists who took a more radical and confrontational approach during demonstrations against the proposed extradition bill that would have allowed suspects to be extradited to mainland China for trial. Unlike peaceful protestors, frontline protestors wore protective gear like helmets, gas masks, and goggles and engaged in direct actions, such as building barricades, throwing Molotov cocktails, and clashing with police to resist what they saw as an existential threat to Hong Kong's freedoms and autonomy. They operated with a strong sense of solidarity and embraced a "be water" philosophy, a strategy

of fluid and flexible resistance inspired by martial artist Bruce Lee, allowing them to quickly mobilize, disperse, and adapt to changing circumstances. Frontline protestor tactics were a break from the civil disobedience that had defined earlier democracy movements in Hong Kong such as the Anti-National Education Movement and the Umbrella Movement.

### Hong Kong Federation of Students

The Hong Kong Federation of Students (HKFS) is a prominent umbrella organization representing students across Hong Kong's universities. The HKFS advocates for students' rights, particularly concerning issues related to education, democracy, and social justice. The HKFS's involvement in activism extends beyond university campuses, as it has been instrumental in organizing and supporting broader pro-democracy movements, engaging in policy advocacy, and voicing concerns about the biggest issues facing Hong Kong. The federation gained significant attention for its leadership in the 2014 Umbrella Movement, where it mobilized student protests.

## **Hong Kong SAR (Special Administrative Region)**

Since Great Britain handed Hong Kong back to China in 1997, the city is referred to as a Special Administrative Region of China. SAR means that Hong Kong can operate autonomously within the People's Republic of China and maintain separate legal, administrative, and judicial systems that are independent of China. The other Special Administration Region in China is Macau, which was controlled by Portugal until it was handed back to China in 1999. The Chinese Central Government is responsible for military and diplomatic affairs in both SARs.

## **Legislative Council (LegCo)**

Hong Kong's Legislative Council (LegCo) is the unicameral legislature responsible for enacting laws, approving budgets, and monitoring the Chief Executive's performance. The council consists of 90 members elected through three different methods: 20 members are elected directly by the public from geographical constituencies (Nathan Law was elected by the constituency of Hong Kong Island), 30 members are chosen by functional constituencies that represent various sectors like business, education, and professional groups, and 40 members are selected by the Election Committee, which is predominantly pro-Beijing. This hybrid electoral system is designed to ensure that both popular and sectoral interests are represented, but it has been criticized for disproportionately favoring pro-Beijing candidates and limiting the influence of directly elected representatives.

## **National Education**

The anti-national education movement in Hong Kong in 2012 was a mass protest against the Hong

Kong government's proposal to introduce a new "Moral and National Education" curriculum in schools, which critics argued was designed to promote patriotism towards the Chinese Communist Party and downplay controversial aspects of China's history, such as the Tiananmen Square massacre. Led by students, the movement quickly gained traction, with large-scale rallies and sit-ins in front of the government headquarters. One of the most prominent groups in the movement was Scholarism, led by then-15-year-old Joshua Wong, who became a key figure in the protests. Facing mounting public pressure and widespread opposition, the Hong Kong government eventually shelved the plan, marking a significant victory for students and demonstrating the power of protest in getting the government to listen to Hong Kong citizens.

## **National Security Law**

Hong Kong's National Security Law, enacted by Beijing on June 30, 2020, is sweeping legislation criminalizing acts of secession, subversion, terrorism, and collusion with foreign forces. The law was imposed directly by the Chinese government, bypassing Hong Kong's Legislative Council, and has been widely criticized for undermining the "one country, two systems" framework agreed to at Hong Kong's handover to China in 1997. The National Security Law gives authorities broad powers to target dissent and the ability to prosecute individuals both inside and outside of Hong Kong for perceived violations. Since its implementation, the law has been used to arrest numerous pro-democracy activists, dissolve political groups, censor media, and restrict free speech.

## **One Country, Two Systems**

"One Country, Two Systems" is a constitutional arrangement negotiated in the 1980s which was designed to ensure that Hong Kong, after its 1997 handover from British to Chinese sovereignty, would retain a high degree of autonomy and maintain its existing legal, economic, and political systems distinct from those of mainland China for 50 years. One Country, Two Systems aimed to balance Hong Kong's unique characteristics with Chinese sovereignty, but over time, many in Hong Kong have felt that Beijing's growing influence has eroded their freedoms promised under the arrangement.

## **Scholarism**

Scholarism was a pro-democracy student activist group in Hong Kong, founded in 2011 by a group of secondary school students, including Joshua Wong and Agnes Chow. It emerged in response to the proposed introduction of a "Moral and National Education" school curriculum that many perceived as a tool for political indoctrination by the Chinese Communist Party. Scholarism quickly became a prominent force, successfully mobilizing thousands of students, parents, and citizens in mass protests and hunger strikes that eventually forced the government to back down on the proposal. Scholarism also played a significant role in advocating for democratic reforms and was a key participant in the 2014 Umbrella Movement, demanding universal suffrage and genuine elections for Hong Kong's Chief Executive. The group disbanded in 2016, with its members moving on to new political endeavors, but its influence in inspiring a new generation of politically engaged youth in Hong Kong remains significant.

## **Self-Determination**

Self-determination is the right of citizens to determine their own political status and pursue their economic, social, and cultural development without external interference. For Hong Kong protestors, self-determination became a crucial rallying point. Many protestors demanded a more democratic system in which they could freely elect their leaders and shape their own future, reflecting concerns over the erosion of the “one country, two systems” principle that was supposed to be in place until 2047.

## **Universal suffrage**

Universal suffrage is the guaranteed right to vote for citizens of voting age. Universal suffrage is a cornerstone of democracy and was one of the key tenets of Hong Kong’s Umbrella Movement. Protestors demanded the right to democratically elect their own leader, the Chief Executive. Protestors believed that the government would better represent Hong Kong citizens if they had a leader who was democratically elected by Hong Kong citizens rather than the current system where the Chief Executive is chosen by a committee of mostly pro-Beijing members.

# Participants

## **Nathan Law**

An influential student leader in Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement and the Anti-Extradition movement as well as the youngest lawmaker ever elected in Hong Kong.

## **Joshua Wong**

A student leader who along with Nathan Law was influential in rallying students in Hong Kong's democracy movement.

## **Agnes Chow**

One of the few female student leaders in Hong Kong's democracy movement and a co-founder of the political party, Demosisto.



# Key Issues

*Who's Afraid of Nathan Law* is an excellent tool for outreach and will be of special interest to people who want to explore the following topics:

- Student activism
- Election reforms
- Civil disobedience
- Freedom of assembly
- Government crackdowns
- National identity
- Self-determination
- Authoritarianism

# Background Information

## The Handover

Britain first took over Hong Kong in 1842 after defeating China in the First Opium War. For the next 150 years, the British ruled Hong Kong, granting Hong Kong citizens many freedoms that differed from the more restrictive environment in Mainland China. In 1997, Hong Kong was handed back to China. Hong Kongers were nervous about the Communist Chinese government now in control of their city. First, they were disappointed they did not have adequate representation during the negotiations for the Handover between China and Great Britain. Second, many Hong Kong citizens or their parents had fled China during the reign of Mao and the Cultural Revolution. Third, the memory of the Tiananmen Square Massacre where the Chinese government violently cracked down on the historic student movement for democracy less than a decade earlier was still fresh in their memories.

To help smooth the transition, the Chinese government agreed to a system dubbed “one country, two systems,” which meant that Hong Kong would enjoy the same freedoms they had under British rule – freedom of the press, freedom of speech, and an independent judicial system– for 50 years. These rights were enshrined in a mini-constitution called “the Basic Law.” One of the main premises of the Basic Law was that Hong Kong citizens would in the future be able to elect the territory’s leader, the chief executive, “by universal suffrage” and “in accordance with democratic procedures.”

For the first decade after the Handover, the freedoms in Hong Kong remained intact, although fulfilling the promise of Hong Kongers being able to elect their own leader kept being postponed. Then, in 2012, the Hong Kong government announced it would be implementing National Education, or Communist Party education, in Hong Kong schools. Joshua Wong, then a young teenager, feared that this was the beginning of the government encroaching on the freedoms Hong Kong had been promised. He launched a youth-driven movement that drew more than 120,000 students to the streets in protest of the law. The government finally agreed to postpone National Education, but a generation of students had been politically awakened. Hong Kongers now believed that if they turned out into the streets in big enough numbers, the government would be forced to listen.

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## Youth Movements

China and Hong Kong both have long histories of student protests. The May Fourth Movement is the 1919 protest against what students felt was subjection from Western governments and Japan. May 4th is now a national holiday in China called Youth Day. While there have been several student protests in Hong Kong and China over the past century, the most famous is the protest in Tiananmen Square in 1989. Thousands of students occupied Beijing's main public square, demanding democracy. At the time, additional student protests broke out across China, and hundreds of thousands of Hong Kongers took to the streets in solidarity. Crackdowns on June 4, 1989, killed protestors in Tiananmen Square as well as other parts of China. In 2012, when the government announced that they would be implementing Communist Party education in traditionally liberal Hong Kong schools, teenager Joshua Wong started the student group Scholarism to spearhead the fight against it. Nathan Law, while a freshman at university, became his school's representative to the Hong Kong Federation of Students, a long-standing group in the Hong Kong university system for students to express their voices on social issues facing their city, primarily the need for Hong Kong citizens to elect their own leader.

As influential student leaders of the Umbrella Movement, Joshua Wong and Nathan Law were staunch advocates of civil disobedience. In fact, the initial protest that sparked the Umbrella Movement was called Occupy Central with Peace and Love. Joshua, Nathan, and their followers understood that protestor violence would be met with violent crackdowns by the government. They felt that their best path to change was through non-violent protest activities like peacefully occupying roads, highways, and sidewalks to get their message heard.



The Umbrella Movement lasted 79 days but did not achieve its goal of Hong Kong being able to elect its own leader. In response to the movement's failure, Nathan Law and Joshua Wong started a political party, Demosisto, to harness the youth vote they had awakened. Nathan was the only founding member of Demosisto who was old enough to run, so he became Demosisto's candidate for the Legislative Council (the equivalent of Congress in the United States). Nathan's and Joshua's goal was to evolve from street protestors on the outside to politicians on the inside so that the concerns of students and young people could be addressed from within the system.

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## The End of Civil Disobedience

In 2018, a Chinese man murdered his pregnant girlfriend, a Hong Kong citizen, while in Taipei. Upon his return to Hong Kong, he admitted the crime, but because there was no extradition treaty between Hong Kong and Taiwan, Taiwan authorities could not charge him with murder. The Hong Kong government cited this case as a reason to establish extradition treaties with China. Opponents of the proposed legislation worried it would be a back door for the Chinese government to extradite Hong Kong dissidents like Nathan Law and Joshua Wong to China. Massive protests erupted in Hong Kong opposing the extradition bill. On June 9, 2019, more than one million Hong Kongers took to the streets. After a violent crackdown on protestors by the police, more than two million Hong Kong citizens marched to express their discontent. This was no longer a youth movement inspired by hope; it was a movement incorporating all segments of Hong Kong society being driven by desperation. On July 1, 2019, the anniversary of Hong Kong's handover to China, protestors broke from their tradition of civil disobedience and stormed the main chamber of Hong Kong's Legislative Council. This escalation caught the world's attention.

The Anti-Extradition Movement engaged a new generation of protestors. While they had been inspired to activism as teenagers by Nathan Law and Joshua Wong, they no longer felt that non-violent civil disobedience would achieve their aims. Daily clashes broke out between police armed with riot gear and non-lethal weapons and protestors throwing bricks and Molotov cocktails. But just as the protestors were making headway, the COVID pandemic hit. The government used COVID restrictions on social gatherings to corral and eventually stop all protests.

With the world distracted with COVID, the government enacted the National Security Law on July 1, 2020, which criminalizes any activities

advocating for secession, using violence, or undermining the power of the central government. The law was passed without input from the citizens of Hong Kong, and its vague language potentially makes anything a crime, including social media posts critical of the government. The National Security Law instantly chilled the democracy movement in Hong Kong and forced Nathan Law to flee into exile. The National Security Law, in effect, ended the “one country, two systems” way of life that was promised to Hong Kong until 2047.

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# DISCUSSION PROMPTS

Immediately after the film, you may want to give people a few quiet moments to reflect on what they have seen. You could pose a general question (examples below) and give people some time to themselves to jot down or think about their answers before opening the discussion. Alternatively, you could ask participants to share their thoughts with a partner before starting a group discussion. Alternatively, you could ask participants to share their thoughts with a partner before starting a group discussion.

- In a few words, how did this film make you feel?
- What do you feel most encouraged to do after seeing this film?
- Do you consider Nathan Law's story one of hope or one of futility? Why?



# The Umbrella Movement

The Umbrella Movement in 2014 was the first large-scale push for universal suffrage in Hong Kong. The movement stressed using civil disobedience and nonviolent tactics to force the government to uphold their promise from the Handover that Hong Kong citizens should be able to elect their own leader.

- What are your thoughts on the justifications for launching the Umbrella Movement? How did the context and goals of the activists shape your perspective?
- During the Umbrella Movement, tens of thousands of democracy activists, mostly students, occupied major streets and highways, effectively shutting down Hong Kong for 79 days and angering the older generation in Hong Kong who were unable to go about their daily lives. How do you think these tactics helped or hurt the movement's goals? How might they have changed public opinion?
  - Are there any US-based political movements that these tactics reminded you of? Which, if any?
- What other strategies could have been used by the students in the Umbrella Movement? How might different choices have affected the movement's outcomes?
- Some critics have argued that the Umbrella Revolution failed because it did not achieve its goal of Hong Kong citizens receiving universal suffrage. Other experts have argued that the Umbrella Movement was a success because it was a political awakening of an entire generation. Do you believe the Umbrella Movement was a failure or a success, and for which communities? Why?

## Nathan Law is Elected to the Legislative Council

After the Umbrella Movement, Nathan Law and Joshua Wong started their own political party, Demosisto. Nathan ran for office and became the youngest lawmaker in Hong Kong's history. Making the transition from an outside activist to a lawmaker can be difficult.

- What are the advantages and challenges of working as an activist compared to being a lawmaker when trying to bring about change?
- How might Nathan Law's age and experience have influenced his effectiveness as a lawmaker if he had not been disqualified?
- What are your thoughts on the government's decision to disqualify Nathan Law for not taking the oath as required? How do you think this decision impacted the political situation in Hong Kong?



# **The Anti-Extradition Movement**

The Anti-Extradition Movement in 2019 erupted over proposed legislation that would allow the Chinese government to extradite Hong Kong citizens to the mainland. Unlike the Umbrella Movement, which was conceived out of hope, the Anti-Extradition Movement was born out of desperation. Many protestors felt that nonviolent tactics were no longer effective and escalated to protest violence.

How do you view the decision of some protestors to use violent tactics during the Anti-Extradition Movement? What might have driven them to this approach?

What role did violence play in shaping the outcomes of the Anti-Extradition Movement? Both political/state-sanctioned violence and the violence of resistance movements?

When the Chief Executive decided to postpone the extradition bill, activists continued to organize protests and clash with police, demanding democracy. How do you think the movement might have changed if the protestors had stopped their demonstrations at that point?

# **The National Security Law**

**In 2020, after escalations between protestors and police, the government enacted the National Security Law (NSL) which outlaws nearly all forms of dissent, including press and even social media posts critical of the government.**

**What are the long-term effects of a law like NSL?**

**How might the NSL's impact on civil unrest compare to its effects on Hong Kong's economy?**

**In what ways did COVID impact the protestors' progress and the governments' attempts to end civil unrest?**

**After NSL was passed, many protest leaders and activists fled into exile. If you were in their position, what factors might influence your decision to leave for exile? How might such a choice impact your life and relationships?**

# CLOSING ACTIVITY

The body of the documentary opens with a quote from Nathan Law, *"It takes years to build democracy, but it can disappear in an instant."* Think about this quote as you answer the following questions:

Describe any experiences you or someone you know might have had related to political oppression or censorship.

What did you learn from this film that applies to the political situation where you live?

What moment in the film impacted you the most? Why?

In what ways, if any, has the film influenced your perspective or actions within your community?

## TAKING ACTION

Stay Informed and Educate Others: Staying informed about current events, government actions, and policies is crucial to safeguarding democracy.

Vote and Participate in Elections: Voting in local, state, and national elections is a direct way to influence government decisions. Beyond voting, participating in campaign efforts, volunteering as a poll worker, or even running for local office can make a difference.

Engage in Civic Activities: Getting involved in civic organizations, attending town hall meetings, and contacting elected representatives to voice opinions on issues helps ensure that public voices are heard.



# Resources

## Freedom House

Freedom House works across political divides to advance policies that strengthen democracy and protect human rights. Supporting activists and journalists who oppose political oppression, Freedom House advances the cause of democracy around the world.

## National Endowment for Democracy

The National Endowment for Democracy (NED) is a nonpartisan nonprofit whose mission is to strengthen democracy around the world. Through grants, NED supports non-government groups in more than 100 countries.

## Democracy International

Democracy International's mission is to advance "a more peaceful and democratic world." Through support in politics, governance, peace and resilience, and learning, Democracy International educates and empowers citizens through election observation, institutional strength and reform, and conflict resolution.

## The World Movement for Democracy

The World Movement for Democracy is a worldwide network of activists, scholars, journalists, and government officials committed to advancing the cause of democracy. Through networking and workshops around the world, the World Movement for Democracy's mission is to unite those who share the same mission.

## Who's Afraid of Nathan Law

The film's official website.

# Credits & Acknowledgments



## About the Author

### Joe Piscatella

Since graduating from the graduate writing program at the University of Southern California, Joe has written for a host of television, film, radio and print projects. His second feature documentary, *Joshua: Teenage vs. Superpower* won the Audience Award at Sundance 2017 and was acquired as a Netflix Original. His first feature documentary, *#ChicagoGirl*, has been seen in more than 60 countries. He was also an executive producer on the documentary *Finders Keepers*, which premiered at Sundance in 2015. In 2019 he was nominated for an Emmy for his directorial work on *Food Interrupted*. In addition to his directing work, Piscatella has written numerous feature scripts and television pilots for 20th Century Fox, Spyglass and Touchstone Television. His credits include Disney's *Underdog*, Warner Bros.' "Ozzy & Drix" and NBC's "Stark Raving Mad."

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