

The Art of Protest in Hong Kong



Kwai Fong Multi storey Car Park
葵芳多層停車場
Lai King
荔景



Protest in Hong Kong



Sophie Mak

The acidic smell of tear gas, the burning sensation of pepper spray stinging the skin, and the brutal sight of police officers attacking protesters were a traumatic yet bonding experience for many Hongkongers between 2019 and 2020. During the summer of 2019, millions of Hongkongers protested an extradition bill that would establish a mechanism for fugitives to be transferred from Hong Kong to mainland China. Many feared that the “high degree of autonomy” and the “one country, two systems” principles that had been enshrined in the Hong Kong Basic Law since 1997 would be eroded once the city’s unique jurisdiction was absorbed into China’s legal system – which is largely characterized by its poor human rights record and a lack of judicial independence.

Initially, protesters only demanded the withdrawal of the extradition bill. However, following an escalation in the severity of policing tactics in June 2019, the protesters’ demands grew to include the release and exoneration of all arrested protesters, the retraction of the characterization of the protests as “riots”, the establishment of an independent commission of inquiry into police misconduct, and systematic democratic change including universal suffrage for Legislative Council and Chief Executive elections.

During the protests, art became an indispensable avenue for dissent and political expression. It offered a peaceful, alternative way for citizens to express their views and ideologies without having to protest in the streets. Artists formed an integral part of the political movement that reinvented Hong Kong’s identity and preserved the city’s soul. Anyone could create their own artwork – and anyone who did was referred to as a member of the “文宣組” (publicity faction) of the movement. Most artists created work under pseudonyms, both to protect their identity and to adhere to the movement’s leaderless nature. Their artworks were often distributed via social media, local forum channels, the encrypted messaging platform Telegram, and Apple’s Bluetooth-enabled AirDrop function. They eventually crossed into reality, ending up as banners and signs that protesters held up during demonstrations or stickers that protesters stuck to walls, escalators, footbridges, and public pavements. These innovative methods of creating and distributing led to a level of unity and fluidity that had never been seen before.



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We redefine who we are

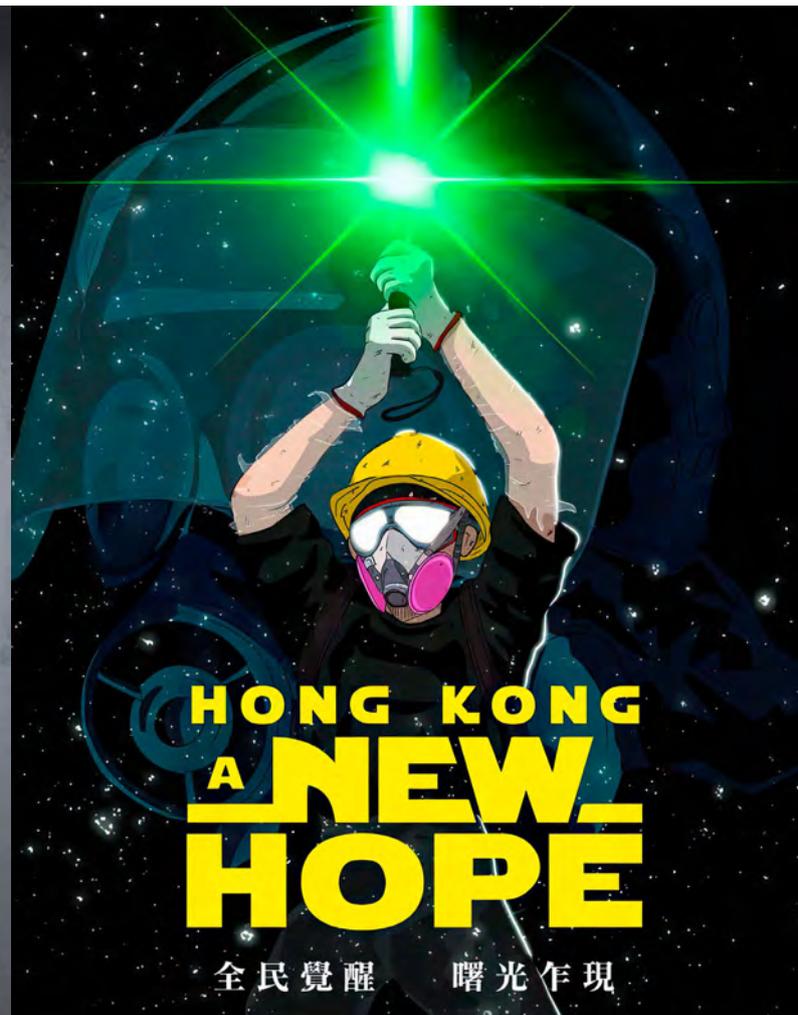
In popular poster art, Hong Kong protesters were often portrayed as brave, passionate fighters prevailing over the evil totalitarian regime and its rulers despite insurmountable odds. The image of the elegant, yet powerful Lady Liberty was often invoked during the protests in the form of statues, posters, and graffiti artwork to symbolize “the unparalleled bravery of Hong-kongers in voicing out amidst the rain of bullets and tear gas”. The design concept behind Lady Liberty was inspired by a typical demonstrator’s outfit: adopting a gallant stance, dressed in head-to-toe black, usually donning a yellow hardhat, protective eye goggles, and gas mask,

her right hand holding an umbrella and left hand waving a flag with the slogan “光復香港，時代革命” (Liberate Hong Kong, Revolution of Our Times) written across it.

The heroic portrayal of the protesters was a direct repudiation of official state narratives that dehumanized and vilified them by comparing them to “cockroaches” and “political viruses”. It affirmed the pure and noble spirit of the protesters, who were willing to sacrifice their own safety for the collective good. A widely shared painting titled “兄弟爬山” (Our Vantage) created by the anonymous illustrator Harcourt Romanticist did just that. The painting directly referenced Eugène Delacroix’s painting “Liberty Leading the People”, a piece commemorating the 1830 July Revolution in France,



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which toppled King Charles X. The new painting inherits the spirit of freedom from the original and depicts the young protesters in masks and helmets standing over a barricade, waving a Black Bauhinia flag, and holding each other up, emphasizing their unity, strength, and bravery as they fight through tear gas and pepper spray.

Heroes only emerge against the existence of villains. In protest art, the Hong Kong Police Force and government officials were often compared to notorious movie villains that needed to be defeated. Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam was often the target of ridicule in satirical illustrations. She was portrayed as a set of monstrous characters that included Pennywise the Clown from the hit film "IT" and the Jigsaw Killer

from the "Saw" movies. The Hong Kong Police Force was compared to the crazed antagonists in the movie series "The Purge", who indiscriminately hunt down and hurt people.

Protest art often showed good prevailing over evil. Even under the most despairing of circumstances, artists remained hopeful that one day protesters, united against the government, could see a Hong Kong in which citizens could enjoy democracy and freedom once again. Seeking inspiration and solace in the rousing number "Do You Hear The People Sing?" from the 1980 musical "Les Misérables", the lyric "even the darkest night will end and the sun will rise" became a revolutionary call for people to overcome adversity and win the fight against evil. Hongkongers took pride in the fact that their un-



willingness to surrender was their most treasured weapon, the one thing that would take them across the finishing line, a message that could be seen in the “We Will Win” poster designed by famous Chinese dissident Badiucao. Similarly, poster art inspired by youth pop culture, such as the “Star Wars” franchise, became popular among protesters. The film revolves around young heroes rising up and triumphing against older, corrupted authority figures, echoing the situation in Hong Kong. The messages resonating throughout the film franchise – upholding one’s ideals, unity amongst the “rebels”, and resistance against the authorities – were a source of hope and inspiration to many in Hong Kong.

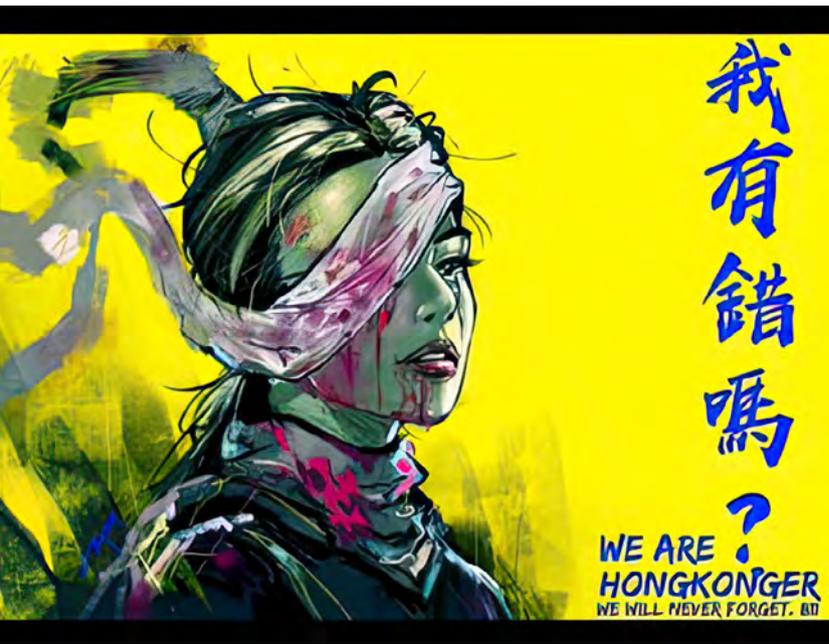
We remember the truth

Official narratives purported by government spokespeople and the “independent” police watchdog have repeatedly whitewashed widely-publicized instances of police misconduct. While armed officers were caught on film waving their batons, shooting rubber bullets, sponge grenades, and even live ammunition at protesters, journalists, and first-aiders, official reports have largely glossed over such excessive uses of force and instead focused on characterizing protesters as lawless and aggressive. Artwork can be used to remind people of the truth about what actually happened. Poster



art depicted the 7.21 Yuen Long incident, during which police allegedly colluded with a large group of white-clad triad members to attack protesters and other members of the public in a train station; similarly depicted was the 8.31 Prince Edward station attack, during which Hong Kong police indiscriminately attacked passengers and arrested peaceful protesters who were returning home on the underground. The police vehemently denied any allegations of misconduct and abuse of power. The artworks sought to show just how untrue that was and to reclaim the narrative. Protest artwork remembered the fallen and all those who have been victimized by the state.

Illustrations served as a tribute to memorialize many individuals that the government would want to be forgotten and to commemorate their sacrifices. Some of these individuals include Marco Leung, who fell to his death from scaffolding while hanging up a protest banner in a yellow raincoat; a volunteer medic who was blinded by a police projectile; Indonesian journalist Veby Mega Indah who lost her eye while covering the protests; Alex Chow, a student demonstrator who fell to his death from a car park near where police were breaking up a protest; and 18-year-old Tsang Chi-kin, who was shot in the chest at point-blank range by the police.

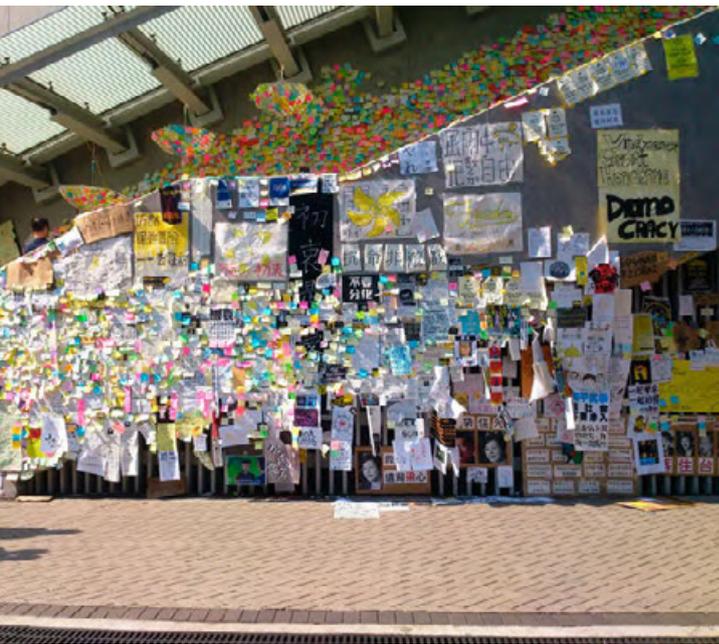


We stand together

Art can be a tool to express collective defiance. One of the more iconic modes of protest in Hong Kong was the construction of Lennon Walls. Inspired by the original Lennon Wall in Prague (where young Czechs drew graffiti to express their grievances against the newly-installed communist government), many thousands of Hong Kong people posted colorful post-it notes and posters expressing democratic wishes for their city. Messages of freedom and democracy “遍地開花” (blossomed everywhere) and Lennon Walls appeared throughout the city. Colorful Lennon Walls could be found on the sides of underpasses and pedestrian bridges, on shopfronts, and in schools. The ubiquitous Lennon Walls served as a symbol of hope and support between like-minded individuals in Hong Kong. Because of their strong symbolism, Lennon Walls were often the site of conflict between pro-democracy and pro-Beijing citizens, some of whom attempted to tear down messages off the walls. Their attempts were, however, unsuccessful as protesters declared they would put up hundreds more Lennon Walls for each that was removed (“撕一貼百”), and messages of solidarity for

the pro-democracy movement truly blossomed everywhere, as mobile Lennon Walls popped up around the world in cities including Toronto, Berlin, Tokyo, London, Sydney, and Auckland.

Solidarity among protesters was also solidified through art. Following a rising number of suicides that appeared to be directly linked to the demonstrations, protesters began chanting the rallying cry “齊上齊落” (We rise up and go down together) and “一個都不能少” (We can't lose one person) to reinforce the importance of unity and remind one another that everyone had an important role to play in the movement. Artwork often echoed this message, raising awareness of mental health by depicting protesters taking care of each other and shouldering each other's emotional burdens. The phrase “Be Water,” coined by martial arts hero Bruce Lee, was also a returning refrain featured in the artworks: it is a reminder that people should maintain flexibility and open-mindedness, and should adapt to the circumstances they have been put into, no matter how trying they might be. Solidarity between pro-democracy movements across different regions was equally important to the Hongkongers' cause as a way to increase



international outreach and defend universal values of human rights and democracy. In October 2019, Hong Kong activists showed support for Catalan protest leaders who were subjected to police violence and unfair jail terms for their political views. Similarly, in August 2020, Hong Kong protesters expressed solidarity with the demonstrators in Belarus who objected to the unlawful election of President Alexander Lukashenko. Aside from holding parallel rallies, multiple artworks were also created to show support for movements rising up in other countries, which included posters typically showing protesters from different countries holding hands. Important to mention is the pan-Asian solidarity movement known as the Milk Tea Alliance, made up of netizens fighting for freedom from Hong Kong, Thailand, Taiwan, and Myanmar. Originally a response to the increased presence of Chinese nationalist commentators on social media, it has since evolved into a dynamic multinational protest movement against tyrannical regimes and an advocate for democracy. Milk tea refers to the common drink found in all the countries that are part of the alliance: Hong Kong-style *lai cha*, Thai *cha yen*, Taiwanese *boba* tea, and Burmese *laphet-yay* are all local variations of milk

tea with strong similarities. In the wake of the Myanmar coup d'état, anti-monarchy protests in Thailand, and Taiwan's struggle against China's increasing aggression and encroachment, artists in Hong Kong began to exercise their creativity by producing artwork that became solidly integrated into the online anti-authoritarian protest movement.

Between 2019 and 2020, Hongkongers turned art into a key part of their protest strategy, something that everyone could contribute to, regardless of age, gender, skill, or profession. However, Hong Kong's creative community has become noticeably muted following the enactment of the National Security Law on 30 June 2020. The legislation, which criminalizes "secession of Hong Kong, subversion against the Chinese government, terrorism, and colluding with foreign forces", scared even the most outspoken activists into self-censorship and exile. Any form of protest, from street demonstrations to street art, has been banned. Those who are prosecuted on these grounds may face life imprisonment. Many are earnestly finding ways to navigate the growing restrictions and reclaim their artistic expression; many more are taking action to preserve the local culture that may get destroyed or wiped off the Internet at any given time. This chapter is one of those efforts.

Illustrations

- p. 22: "HK Protest Art, Kwai Fong Lennon wall" by Studio Incendo, 2019.
- p. 24, left: "Our Vantage" by Harcourt Romanticist, 2019.
- p. 27, right: @kailanegg1, 2020.
- p. 29, right: ceeseven, CC-BY-SA-4.0.

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