

*Analysis of Social Movements in Hong Kong in 2014 and 2019 From the Perspective of
Body Politics and Feeling Politics*

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Abstract

2019 was an important year in Hong Kong's history, especially in terms of its protest history. The protests were triggered by the amendment to the Extradition Bill prompted by the murder of a Hong Kong woman in Republic of China. This paper discusses the developments of Hong Kong's protests and society from 2014 to 2020, from the Umbrella Movement to the protest against the Extradition Act. To better understand the protests, this thesis focuses on the emotions - the melancholy, powerlessness, guilt, sadness, and anger among the protesters. This focus takes place in the historical and cultural background of Hong Kong. Studies on (post)colonialism and Judith Butler's theories on body politics are used as the supporting material. In this research, the phenomenological method is applied and this functions as an empirical investigation, using interviews conducted from 2014 to 2019; newspaper articles from Hong Kong and other countries; videos, as well as a documentary film as research materials. The paper tries to find out the role of emotions in Hong Kong's society and protests, or how different emotions influenced the demonstrators' reactions and the effect of the length and the intensity of the protests. The transformations and dynamics of the protests between 2014 and 2019 will be compared and analysed.

Keywords: Protest, Hong Kong, Body Politics, Feeling Politics

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Introduction

2014 and 2019 are two important years marked in Hong Kong protest history after the change of sovereignty — the Umbrella Movement and the Anti-extradition bill protest. This paper is to analyse these two social movements in Hong Kong in 2014 and 2019 from the perspective of body politics and feeling politics. It is a paper written from a reflective perspective and its core research question is the function of emotions and bodies in the Hong Kong protests. It is not just about what emotions protesters felt but how these emotions affected the bodily actions in the protests.

This is phenomenological research with empirical study, including interviews conducted from 2014 to 2019; news articles from Hong Kong and foreign presses; videos, as well as documentary films as research materials. Yet, some news articles, blogs and commentaries included in this study were removed from the internet because of the implementation of the national security law on 30 June 2020. These can still be found in the bibliography of this presentation. For the same reason, some materials used in this study do not contain an author name but rather published under the name ‘Hongkongers’, so as to avoid potential legal prosecution. Besides these, in order to spread the protest updates wider throughout the course of events, some materials were published by the protesters as open-source documents without the support of editors from the publishing house. Such references were proven carefully, with news articles as supporting materials, before they were included in this paper.

Since the research is conducted during and shortly after the protests, there are some limitations in this respect: the fact that there are not enough discussions about body or feeling politics in Hong Kong or Asia, most used theories, such as body and feeling politics in this paper are published in the US or Europe. However, the analysis was written with the support of in-depth cultural analysis in an attempt to strike a balance. On the other hand, since the definition of emotions varies in different disciplines and theories, this paper will only focus on emotion psychology in order to prevent ambiguities.

In feeling politics, there is no clear definition to distinguish feelings and emotions. As a result, these two terms are used interchangeably.

The historical and cultural background of Hong Kong

Hong Kong was a British colony from 1840 to 1997 under the ‘positive non-intervention’ policy, which was also known as the ‘Laissez-faire’ policy (Lo, 1997). After the change of sovereignty on 1 July 1997, ‘One country, two systems’ was introduced in Hong Kong, stating Hong Kong should remain high degree autonomy (“Basic Law”, 1997). This governmental form remained unchanged until the implementation of national security law on 30 June 2020. It shall be noted that Hong Kong has never had genuine democracy.

According to Hannah Arendt (1986), colonisation is a form of imperialism, which was originally commercial, in order to expand economically in face of production and economic slowdown. For Britain, trade in Hong Kong had always had a priority, and played an essential role when it came to decision-making. With a mixture of arrogance that Britain considered themselves as ‘higher breeds’ and respect for the local practices, the colonial government refrain from spreading British law and culture and would not intervene in the locals’ cultural or religious interests, except for some cases that would harm the colonial authority.

Therefore, most Hong Kong Chinese families in Hong Kong could keep practising Chinese philosophy even under the colonial rule. Confucianism was the most popular of these as it was transformed from ethics to a political ideology by successive regimes since the Han dynasty. Hence, the colonial government and the current government kept this ideology and have been using it to stress the importance of certain elements of Confucianism: the Mandate of Heaven (天命) and the five primary human relationships (五倫). The Mandate of Heaven is a concept used by the regime to legitimise its authority by emphasising the emperor or the government is the ambassador sent by heaven that people have to obey (Guo, 2003), a concept to maintain social stability; whereas the five primary human relationships focuses on enforcing the hierarchical relationships in the society. Since the Han dynasty, regimes often combined the two concepts and diffuse them in some terminology such as ‘parental officials’ (Fumu Guan 父母官), referring to governors and ‘children-people’ (zimin 子民), referring to citizens subjected to the regime, under Confucianism and the patriarchal system (Cao, 2018).

Despite the one country two systems policy, the Chinese government intended to gradually infuse its ideologies to maintain and centralise the authority of the Chinese central government. Since 2003, the Hong Kong government started introducing arguable bills which led to social movements. This paper will, however, only focus on the ones introduced in 2014 and 2019.

Body and Emotions

This section demonstrates how body and emotion can shape the length and intensity of protests and how they interact with one another during protests. As Judith Butler mentioned in ‘Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street’, the body must appear for politics to take place (2011). Body creates not only actions but also language. Language here does not refer only to vocal or written language, but also the gesture as body language in the protest.

In spite of that, once the protest starts, it might also be able to take place without the necessity of bodies taking collective actions simultaneously. In both 2014 and 2019 protests, protesters wrote their feelings on memo notes and stuck them on the wall and named it the ‘Lennon Wall’ (Pang, 2020), referring to the song ‘Imagine’ by John Lennon. The memo notes remained a mark on the wall and afterwards, when another person passed by and stopped to read the memo notes, a protest space would occur, just as Arendt described, the room will not disappear because of the absence of body (1972). The notes delivered the history and the others’ experiences, without the reader experienced it physically (Butler, 2012). In 2019, with the enlarged protest scale, ‘Lennon Walls’ could be seen in many various districts. The political space was scattered in different part of the city and blurred the public and private.

Thanks to technology, another new form of protest was created in 2019 — the protesters spread the news of the protest via airdrop or bluetooth (Hui, 2019). This act could be done by one person and the political space did not limited to the protest site but also the place where the other person read the news. With this form, boundary between private and public is blurred. The same applied to online discussion forums, where protest and political space changed from on-site to the digital world.

Apart from the body, emotions also play an important role in protests, as a motivation or as a drive to maintain its momentum. According to emotion psychology, feelings and emotions

are formed culturally and learnt socially (Kirman, Livet & Teschl, 2010; van Troost, van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2013). Emotions are the result of an incidence through cognitive judgement, which is partly based on the past experience (Smith & Lazarus, 1993). In another words, emotions and cognition cannot be simply separated, as emotion is an element for decision making.

Feelings which arise from political topics, politicians or within society, are considered political feelings. Max Planck Institut has conducted a study in this regard and their study showed that feelings in politics and for politics are not seen as individual or separated. Besides, the more people participate in politics, the more important the role of emotions. It is also said that the longer the protests take place, the more emotions will occur.

Emotions among protesters are not only emotions against external parties, but also within the group itself, such as trust and pride. These positive and negative emotions can be categorised into two groups: reflexive emotions like anger, and surprise; and the others, which contain long-term influences, like love and trust (Frech & Richter, 2018; Ekman, 1972). According to Benskis's study (2010), protesters usually experience mixtures of feelings at the same time or during a short period amid the protest.

Emotions can rarely be separated from bodily actions in protests and they mutually reinforce each other. Similar to emotions, bodies in the protests are also recognised collectively. In Butler's words, the appearance of more than one body creates a political space — a space that constitutes the gap between one body and the others, a space, where actions emerged from the 'between' (Butler, 2011). The actions are seen as performative, as this exercise claims back the public space, visualises the emotions within the protest and/or extends certain protest moments.

Protest in Hong Kong in 2014 and 2019

Hongkongers have never been the subject of Hong Kong, not in colonial times and not after the change of sovereignty in 1997. Hong Kong was removed from the United Nations' list of non-self-governing territories at the request of the People's Republic of China. Territories in this list are defined as territories whose people have not yet attained a full measure of self-government, and whose people should have the right to achieve self-determination. ("Erklärung", 1960). Due to the removal from the list, Hong Kong's destiny was decided by the British government and the People's Republic of China in the 1980s.

The fact that Hongkongers were not able to enact self-determination created frustration in society. Ackbar Abbas wrote in his book 'Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance' that the frustrations of Hongkongers turned into a motivation for them to thrive economically (1997). For most people, Hong Kong was only a springboard to earn enough money to migrate to other countries, leading to a relatively weak 'Hong Kong' political and social identity (Mathews, Ma, & Lui, T. 2008).

In August 2014, the Information Office of the State Council in Beijing issued a White Paper on the 'One Country, Two Systems' policy, suggesting a universal suffrage without complete democracy, as candidates of the chief executive were to be pre-selected by Beijing ("Chinese State", 2014). This led to the 79-days Umbrella movement with about 1.2 protesters ("中大民調", 2014). Five years later, the Hong Kong government introduced an extradition bill after the Hongkonger Chan Tong-kai murdered his girlfriend in Taiwan

(Ramzy, 2019). The introduced bill was not only applicable to this specific case in Taiwan, but also in China, where a different law system is carried out. (Ramzy, 2019) Another large-scale protest with 2 millions protesters broke out (“Hong Kong Protest”, 2019) and it lasted for more than half a year. Inspired by the film ‘Avengers’, the protest in 2019 was often described as the Endgame, the ultimate fight for Hong Kong’s future by the Hongkongers (Chan, 2020).

In most of these protests, protesters underwent mostly negative emotions, especially when the protests lasted long and when conflicts took place. Most interviews with protesters in 2014 and 2019 showed that anger and guilt are the two dominant emotions, which are presumed to be the protesters’ motivations or continuous drive. Both protests started peacefully with demonstrations and rallies, however, as time passed by, the protests escalated with more violence, including police brutality and in the case of 2019, protesters started to throw stones in response to police brutality so as to gain time for frontline protesters to leave the site.

As mentioned previously, emotions in protests are seen as collective, furthermore, emotions are also considered as contagious (Gaines, 2021). Emotions can be influenced by the surrounding environment whether consciously or subliminally (Baumann & DeSteno, 2010), for example, anger from frontline protesters could be spread to the crowd and result in escalation, leading to possible physical conflicts between protesters and the police. Not only on-site, emotions can also be spread virtually in the internet through social media, news or other online platform. Schrobsdorff (2017) pointed out anger is specifically contagious and influential in social media. Other emotions which are to be spread further and quicker in the digital world are sadness and joy.

Other than the continuous negative emotions in the protest, a concept called loss aversion introduced by Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky is also key to the prolongation of the protests (Yechiam, 2015). It explains how the human being perceives loss greater than a gain, even when the two are of the same proportions. This is also known as negativity bias. As negative emotion accumulates and outweighs the positive emotion on the protesters’ side and the police’s side, the longer the protest lasts, the higher the intensity of protests would be, as well as the higher the possibility of violence and police brutality.

Difference between protests in 2014 and 2019

After the end of the umbrella movement, Hong Kong society went through big changes, such as decentralisation and de-hierarchisation. Various small communities, as well as political parties, were formed as a result of the disappointments towards conventional big political parties, as established institutions tend to make cognitive shortcuts to avoid cumbersome and time-consuming decision making process (Weyland, 2021). Meanwhile, Hong Kong’s identity was strengthened (Public Opinion Programme, 2019). The newly formed political parties in 2014 called themselves localists and emphasise the priority of Hongkongers in the Hong Kong politics. Those parties also re-contextualised Confucianism in an attempt to delegitimise the current government. An example of this was to alter the hierarchy between Hong Kong and China. Since 1997, the Hong Kong government has been using ‘Grandfather’ to refer to China, to show kinship and the importance to obey the order given by the Chinese government (Cheung, 2020). However, after 2014, localists tried to compare the beginning of colonial Hong Kong with the formation of the People’s Republic of China to claim that Hong Kong is in a certain sense older than China. On the other hand, they tried to legitimise the protest in 2014 by giving notice to certain terms or phrases avoided by the government,

which can also be found in Confucianism, but without the purpose of stabilising the society. For example, they called the protest ‘Umbrella Revolution’ instead of ‘Umbrella Movement’. The literal wordings of revolution in Chinese is change (革) the fate (命), a term that opposes the Mandate of Heaven (Cheung, 2020) . They also made the sentence in Mensius ‘I have never heard of putting a sovereign to death’ (未聞弑君也) known, which in Confucianism means a sovereign will lose his Mandate of Heave, as well as his legitimacy, when his people no longer support him (Cheung, 2020).

Hence, the main differences between the Umbrella Movement and the Protest against the extradition bill were not the duration or the locations, but the collective identity, which also had an effect on the protest form, since the protesters were aware that one of the reasons for the failure of the Umbrella Movement was internal conflicts. In 2014, the widely spread slogan was ‘I want genuine suffrage’ (我要真普選), but 5 years later, the subject of the slogans turned from ‘I’ to ‘Hongkongers’, for example, the slogan ‘Hongkongers, hang in there!’ (香港人, 加油) Or when protesters in 2019 described their peers as hands and feet (手足), indicating each individual is an important part of the body, which refers to Hong Kong. Unlike the consistent internal disputes back in 2014, tolerance for violent and non-violent actions from different democratic camps are seen and promoted (“學者”, 2019). For example in two significant events in 2019, when some protesters were besieged by the police on the two university campuses: The Chinese University of Hong Kong and The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Police trapped the protesters in the campus and fired teargas and live-ammunition at those who tried to escape. In response to this, protesters then protected themselves by throwing stones or Molotov cocktails. Instead of blaming the violence used by the protesters like in 2014, crowds were formed out of fear and worries to surround the police from the outside and they used various tactics to distract the police so as to give the protesters on campus a chance to escape. At the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, a few protesters formed a motorcycle rescue group to carry the besieged protesters away, who escaped the campus by climbing down from the bridge. In addition, the idea of sacrificing one’s future, the risk to be imprisoned, in exchange for a better collective future in Hong Kong with just and freedom was widely spread.

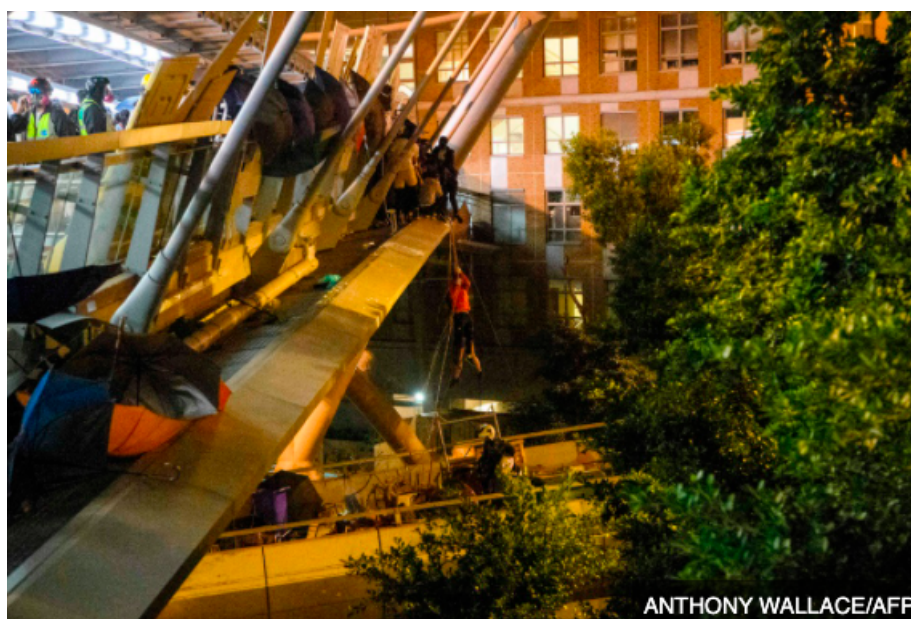


Figure 1. Wallace (2019), BBC News

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, violent and non-violent actions were promoted. According to Minouche Shafik, people's physical and mental health are more important drives to vote comparing to economic factors (Stewart, 2021). By the end of the intense protest on the university campuses, the district council election took place and the pro-democratic camp won 90% of the seats. The election was seen as a peaceful outlet for protesters to channel their anger at the government and the protest was calmed.

On the whole, the protest in 2019 lasted longer than in 2014 and it became more and more intense. This increased the risk of suffering post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), as one frequently exposed to violence and in anxious state (Ni et al., 2020). Many protesters, and also those who had seen the photos and videos or watched the news in person, in text or on social media, and those who lived or worked in the protest area suffered PTSD. (Mogul, 2019) One of the most common symptoms of PTSD is being in a dissociative state, in which the person might be disconnected from feelings. In some cases, frontline protesters could not sense the danger, but would define the withdrawal of protest as weak or 'betrayal' of the other frontline protesters. The guilt of protesters for the others— when they see that others are hurt or arrested, might outweigh the fear when they see the police shoot tear gas or round bullets due to negativity bias. As guilt is one of the motivations to persist the protest, the dissociative state to a certain degree added fuel to lengthen the whole protest duration. According to the survey conducted in 2020, one-third of the interviewed adults suffered PTSD because of the protest. (Ni et al., 2020). Yet, the physical and psychological burden created during the protest did not bring it to the end. The protest ended due to the policies derived from the pandemic (Görlach, 2020) and the implementation of national security law in 2020 which gradually led to the dissolution of civic society (“解散香港”, 2020).

Conclusion

As mentioned in the beginning, this paper is written from a reflective perspective. Originally, it was to understand the dynamic and the development of the Hong Kong protests in 2014 and 2019.

After months of researching, some research questions were answered. The lack of self-determination and frustration led to social movements in Hong Kong, especially in 2014 and 2019. An example for that is the slogan 'Self-determination' (命運自主) on the main stage of the Umbrella movement. During the two protests, the Hong Kong identity was created and strengthened when the protesters saw themselves more as a collective than individual, as they connect themselves with the future of the city. Emotions were the spark and fuel of the protest, it was initially a private individual feelings, but then became collective.

In the extradition bill protests, loss aversion and learnings from 2014 meant a greater intensity of protests. These intense feelings resulted in a greater commitment of bodies and the emergence of a tolerant and flexible 'we' in action. Hence, a variety of actions, violent and non-violent, did not implode the protests like in 2014. Emotions achieved a redefinition of public and private by allowing the 'we' to form.

In Butler's words, protesters claim the public space (2011). Note that in Confucianism, one has no complete autonomy to work on his/ her body, as 'bodies, to every hair and bit of skin, are subjected to ones' parents, and one must not presume to injure or wound them' (身體髮膚 , 受之父母). The concept of body in Hong Kong Chinese society and its function in

protest could be developed into another chapter. Topics such as gender performances in society and the protest in regard to different emotions are also yet to be discussed.

To conclude, body and emotion find and produce the public, on the other, they are part of the actions and at the same time, they support the actions. Politics in itself is difficult to define regarding its boundary between public and private, as are the feelings and actions related to it.

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