Visual Protest: The Roles of Political Cartoons and Graphic Arts on Hong Kong's Anti-ELAB Movements

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Introduction

The Anti-Extradition-Law-Amendment-Bill (ELAB) Movement in 2019 stands as a monumental social movement in Hong Kong's recent history. Its aftermath led to a tightening grip by the Chinese government over the city. The introduction of the new national security law in 2020 posed not just a palpable threat to Hong Kong's freedoms but also ignited the largest emigration wave since the 1990s[1]. Despite the Hong Kong Government's assurances that the law would only target a minority and not impinge on free speech, the immediate consequence told a different story. A chilling effect saw numerous media outlets being forced to shut down and influential opinion leaders depart from the city.

The creative sector faced its challenges as well. A surge in self-censorship meant critical works began to vanish. Numerous artists felt compelled to deactivate their social media or remove works critical of authorities. Zunzi, an iconic figure of political cartooning in Hong Kong, halted his four-decade-long daily cartoon column amidst police pressure[2]. Art funding bodies have started to censor works that claimed to be a threat to the national security. This change contrasts sharply with era of the Anti-ELAB protest, which was marked by a burst of creativity.

Historically, visual art has played a significant role in Hong Kong's protests, notably since the Anti-National Education Movement in 2012 and especially during the 2014 Umbrella Movement. The 2019 protests could be viewed as a pinnacle in the rising trend of online political cartoons since 2012. Compared to the physical installation

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[1]   As of August 2022, over 113,000 residents left city in 12 months, as Hong Kong sees largest mid-year population drop on record. (Source: https://hongkongfp.com/2022/08/12/over-113000-residents-left-city-in-12-months-as-hong-kong-sees-largest-mid-year-population-drop-on-record/)

[2]   Zunzi, an iconic political cartoonist in Hong Kong, saw his political cartoon column in the Mingpao newspaper suspended in May 2023 following a series of criticisms from Hong Kong officials.

art that appeared at the occupied sites during the Umbrella Movement, the political cartoons and graphic art of 2019, often labelled as "Propaganda materials" (文宣) , took on an unexpectedly more expansive roles in the decentralized or leaderless protest framework. They were instrumental in areas like internal communication, mobilization, documentation, and consolation, effectively filling the void left by the lack of centralised leadership.

While much research has illuminated the decentralized nature of the Anti-ELAB protest, with an emphasis on the role of technology and social media, the profound impact of visual art on this movement has largely been overlooked. Amidst a surge of tens of thousands of artworks, it beckons the questions: How did these visual expressions amplify the movement? What implications arose from this artistic explosion in terms of fostering synergy among artists, and how did collective creativity flourish within such a decentralized setting? As these significant materials begin to fade from public memory, this article seeks to address these questions in two main sections. The first section delves deep into the diverse artworks, examining their roles throughout the protest. The second provides a detailed analysis of the driving factors behind this blossoming of collective creativity, covering aspects such as artist group compositions, role-playing strategies, the ethos of resource sharing and "open-source" culture, the evolution of hybrid spaces like the Lennon Wall, and finally, the emergence of a new youth-driven protest aesthetic.

A Brief overview of the Anti-ELAB protest and the use of social media under the decentralised leadership

Initiated in early 2019, the Anti-ELAB protests erupted in response to a proposed extradition bill that would have allowed individuals to be extradited from Hong Kong to mainland China. What began as a series of large-scale peaceful demonstrations, with over two million participants at their peak, took a turn after the 12 June demonstration was branded a "riot" by the Hong Kong Government. This label escalated confrontations between protesters and police, resulting in frequent clashes across the city.

Within six months, there were three primary demonstrations, along with 50 sizable protests and over 100 smaller gatherings[3] . The early stages of the protests did not adopt a decentralized leadership model. The initial three primary demonstrations were organised by the Civil Human Rights Front, a traditional group from the "moderate camp". However, as tensions heightened, the protesters began to diverge from this

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[3]   Yuen et al. 2022.

conventional leadership. The change was influenced by the transition from static demonstrations to dynamic "fluid protests". The sentiment also reflected the 2014 Umbrella Movement's perspective, where many believed that centralized leadership was a major factor that failed the whole movement. Consequently, faith in the "Big Stage" diminished, leading many protesters to be wary of alignment with any formal political organisations. Instead, they recognized the potency of individual voices, and embrace the flexibility brought by the decentralised organisation.

Although decentralized leadership was praised for its democratic ethos and adaptability, it brought its own set of challenges. These included complex decision-making processes, the need to set unambiguous goals, and ensuring that messages were effectively communicated. Without a singular guiding voice, reaching a consensus and preserving unity proved challenging. To address these, protesters leaned heavily on various social media platforms, crafting a web of interconnected information channels to solve those problems. The key platforms during the Anti-ELAB protests were:

LIHKG - An online discussion forum

LIHKG (連登), popular among Hong Kong's youth, became the movement's "headquarters." This open forum was the principal space for brainstorming and debate. Most forum members, opting for anonymity, introduced their own ideas, sparked debates on tactics, and took part in decision-making via the built-in voting system. The forum also became an essential resource center where members shared posters, artworks, and live protest updates.

Facebook

With over 6 million users in Hong Kong, Facebook was pivotal in spreading information during the protests. Facebook Live streaming utilised by both mainstream and online media, together with several independent journalists, was a major source for real-time protest updates. Live streaming enabled an immediate public response. Many artworks and illustrations drew inspiration from visuals captured in live streams and press photos. As the protests surged, publicity group and the so-called "public sea" emerged, archiving illustrations, posters, and graphics by artists and the public. These artworks were accessible for download, allowing wider support for the movement. Simultaneously, nearly 100 artists showcased their creations on their Facebook pages.

Telegram

Telegram, known for its encrypted chat functionality, gained the trust of protesters as early as the Umbrella Movement in 2014. During the Anti-ELAB protests, it became a popular messaging app for communication and organizing actions. The app's group chat feature facilitated the creation of various "working groups" comprising individuals with specific expertise, such as lawyers, first-aiders, and designers, who provided diverse forms of support to the protesters. Some of these groups attracted massive followers, with certain reports noting over 100,000 subscribers in a single group.

Notably, the two largest "publicity groups" who were responsible for disseminating promotional materials including artworks and graphics, combined had over 161,000 subscribers and had disseminated a staggering 23,000 images or videos by October 2019 [4] .

The roles and dynamics of the social media platforms formed the structural backbone of the entire Anti-ELAB movement. LIHKG was the main brainstorming hub, a digital space where ideas were birthed and debated. Telegram, prized for its encrypted messaging, provided a secure environment for tactical planning, ensuring confidentiality. Facebook's wide-reaching influence meant that news, updates, and media related to the protests could be broadcasted efficiently to the broader public. Utilizing these platforms, protesters established a multi-layered, interconnected network. Each node or segment within this structure interacted organically with the others, culminating in a decentralized yet unified organizational system. Within this framework, artists, and cartoonists, who largely operated independently, adeptly maneuverer through this intricate web. Their artworks, though individually conceived, echoed across the movement, serving as tools to facilitate various facets of the protest.

Methodology: The Image Archive

This study employed content analysis as its primary research methodology. By meticulously examining symbols, textual elements, and various graphical components, our aim was to decode and interpret the inherent messages conveyed within the works. Beyond the immediate content, we delved into the context surrounding each piece. Factors such as the artist's background, the dissemination channels of the artworks, and responses from the audience were analysed. This comprehensive approach enabled us to ascertain the roles and functions these artistic pieces played within the larger framework of the movement.

To facilitate the study, an image archive was constructed, comprising digital images collected between June 2019 and January 2020. The archive includes a diverse range of images, such as illustrations, cartoons, graphic design, paintings, as well as photos of graffiti and street arts found on Lennon Walls. These images were predominantly sourced from the following:

    a. Artist's Facebook page
    b. Publicity Groups on Facebook
    c. Publicity Groups on Telegram
    d. On-site photos from Lennon Walls

Artworks from the Anti-ELAB protests can be broadly classified into two categories:

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[4]   See 蘇昕琪 2019.

those by named artists and those by anonymous creators. Named artists typically have their own Facebook or IG accounts where they first publish their pieces. Following this initial post, their followers often repost these works to Publicity Groups or share them within their own networks. In contrast, pieces by anonymous artists present more of a challenge to trace. These works often emerge in diverse locations, from social media platforms to Lennon Walls, and the prevalence of cross-posting adds to the difficulty of tracking these pieces. Given these challenges, our study prioritized named artists, as their backgrounds, previous works, and established audience provide a richer context for analysis."

Composition of participants

Over a span of six months, we amassed close to 7,000 images. Notably, around 6,000 of these originated from 115 identifiable artists. Based on our findings, we can categorize the participants as:

Editorial Cartoonists
These are artists who have historically showcased their work in traditional print mediums like newspapers and magazines.

Online Political Cartoonists
These independent cartoonists predominantly publish their political cartoons in their online channels.

Commercial Illustrators
Typically, these artists focus on non-political subjects including commercial illustrations or self-published works.

Overseas Cartoonists
These are mainly Chinese artists or cartoonists in exile, lending their external views to the local protest scenario.

Members from the Telegram Publicity Group
This group is predominantly anonymous, comprising artists and professional designers who works in the advertising industry.

Non-Professionals and Amateurs
These are the members of the public who primarily contributed works to the Lennon Walls.

To present a structured overview of the works, we have employed a tagging system to categorize the images. Below is a comprehensive breakdown of this system:

Basic Function
These tags identify the primary objective of the artwork. Was its intention to motivate, inform, satirize, or something else entirely?

Politicians and Characters Portrayed
These tags help in determining the key figures represented in the artworks. Whether they're government officials, international figures, or fictional characters, identifying them can offer insights into the political and cultural commentary of the piece.

Groups of People Portrayed
This distinguishes between different sectors or groups within society that the artwork might be depicting, such as protesters, police, or civilians.

Slogan or Text
By tagging the slogans, catchphrases, or other textual elements, it is possible to gauge the prevalent themes or messages conveyed by the artwork.

Specific Objects / Symbols
This focuses on prominent objects and symbols within the artwork, like yellow umbrellas (symbolic of a previous protest), gas masks, and the Lion Rock.

Related Events and Activities
These tags pinpoint specific events, incidents, or actions the artwork is referencing, like a significant protest, a police action, or a legislative move.

Locations of the Events
This provides a geographical context to the artwork. It can be as specific as a street name, buildings or as general as a district.

Use of Metaphor and Storytelling Approach
Some artworks might use allegories, metaphors, or extended narratives to convey their message. Identifying these can be crucial in understanding the deeper layers of the piece.

Graphic Style
This relates to the artistic style or technique employed – whether it's a realistic portrayal, abstract, cartoonish, etc. This can shed light on the artist's intention and the emotion they're trying to evoke.

Utilizing these tags, we are equipped to conduct comprehensive analyses, delving into both the explicit messages and the broader context of each art piece. Indeed, this method is not without its limitations. Many artworks may embody multifaceted functions that the artists themselves might not have initially intended. Categorization becomes challenging when pieces transcend singular definitions. Additionally, analysing pieces, especially those crafted by the public, within the confines of established art frameworks can be a complex process.

Some initial observations:

After an extensive review, the collected works were classified into 12 distinct categories. These classifications represent the basic functions or impacts these artworks rendered to the movement. The works were bifurcated based on their targeted audience: some aimed at the internal group of protesters, while others were designed for an external audience.

External Functions: These primarily targeted non-protesters, seeking to inform, persuade, or emotionally connect with them. The underlying aim was to present the movement in a positive light, fostering understanding and potential support from the broader public. Functions include:

— Commentary

— Satire

— Confrontation

— Explanation

— Propaganda

— Documentation

Internal Functions: Within the protester community, these functions acted as the glue, binding participants together, reinforcing their collective identity, motivating continued involvement, and amplifying their shared sentiments. Functions include:

— Rally

— Mobilisation

— Tactic

— Consolation

— Ideology

— Self-expression

The enumerated functions not only demonstrate the active involvement of artists but also the expansive scope addressed by the artworks. This movement saw a spectrum of works, some of which were unprecedented in previous protests. For example, while mobilization and propaganda have typically been the primary objectives of protest artwork, this movement uniquely emphasized both the emotional needs of the protesters and the more rational needs such as tactics. This emphasis indicates artists' adaptability in fulfilling varying requirements of the movement.

Formation of Collective creativity

The advent of social media has democratized participation in protests. No longer does one need to physically march on the streets to be labelled a "protester". This platform has notably lowered the threshold, enabling even those traditionally apathetic to politics to make meaningful contributions. The escalating tension of the protests galvanized a growing number of artists to react and channel their opinions through art.

Organically, without any structured planning, these artists evolved a working model. This encompassed establishing channels for disseminating their works, finding inspiration in ongoing events, and collaborating with fellow artists. Over time, a unique creative culture burgeoned amongst these artists, and the sheer volume of artworks stands testimony to this emergent collective creativity.

In dissecting this collective artistic impulse, the image archive reveals four pivotal factors that drove its formation. They will be further elaborated in the next section:

Artist Synergy
A thematic synchronicity is evident in many of the artworks. Despite their individual styles, there seems to be an interconnected approach. Through their art, they've engaged in dynamic exchanges, and these collective efforts have shaped a unified artistic direction.

The Open-source Ethos
The artists in this movement have showcased a commendable spirit of generosity. Not only have they shared their artworks openly, but they've also provided templates, facilitating reinterpretations by others. The evolution of a public image archive epitomizes this culture of sharing and collaboration.

The Lennon Wall Impact
While the digital medium was predominant, the emergence of Lennon Walls introduced a tangible aspect to the art. This physical representation not only magnified the artworks' reach but also inspired artists to harness physical spaces, transforming them into sites of alternative occupation.

Emergence of New Aesthetics
There's been a noticeable shift from conventional protest visuals to the inclusion of popular culture. This transformation infuses a lighter tone into the protests, and the arbitrary choice of icons align with the "be water" philosophy.

Functions of artworks in Anti-ELAB Movement

External Functions:

a. Commentary

The largest proportion of artworks falls into this category. These pieces primarily served to provide an analysis and interpretation of the political events during the protest. By conveying satirical commentaries, the artworks were able to reveal the underlying implications of the incidents they portrayed. However, as most artists lacked experience in creating commentary works, their pieces often fell short in terms of in-depth analysis. Instead of employing metaphors and symbols, as political cartoonists typically do, many opted for a more straightforward approach, like using plain text to convey their thoughts. Such artworks often drew upon prevailing discussions on social media and then expanded upon them.

(Figure 1. A work by artist VA Wongsir. Image source: Facebook)

b. Satire

Satirical works constitute a significant portion of the archive. Like commentary art, these creations act as an emotional release for protesters, allowing them to articulate their resistance against the authorities. Using humour, irony, and exaggeration, artists critique, ridicule, and lampoon government officials, the police, and pro-government personalities. Frequently, these works cleverly incorporate memorable quotes from news reports, transforming them into witty puns. Paired with exaggerated caricatures, these elements infuse the protest with a sense of humour.

(Figure 2. A work that uses the artwork "The Comedian" by Maurizio Cattelan to mock a pro-government council member. Image source: Facebook)

c. Confrontation

These pieces are characterized by their direct visual assaults on the pro-government side. Using distorted imagery, often accompanied by text — sometimes containing radical or even vulgar language — they aim to denigrate figures like Carrie Lam, Hong Kong's Chief Executive, pro-government politicians, and police officials. The rising prevalence of such artworks reflects the deepening public sentiment, especially the growing disdain for the police, who faced widespread criticism for their alleged use of excessive force and purported lack of discipline. The increase in confrontational artworks also indicates the public's need to voice their frustrations. For those sympathetic to the movement but not actively involved in the protests, these creations provided an important channel for emotional expression.
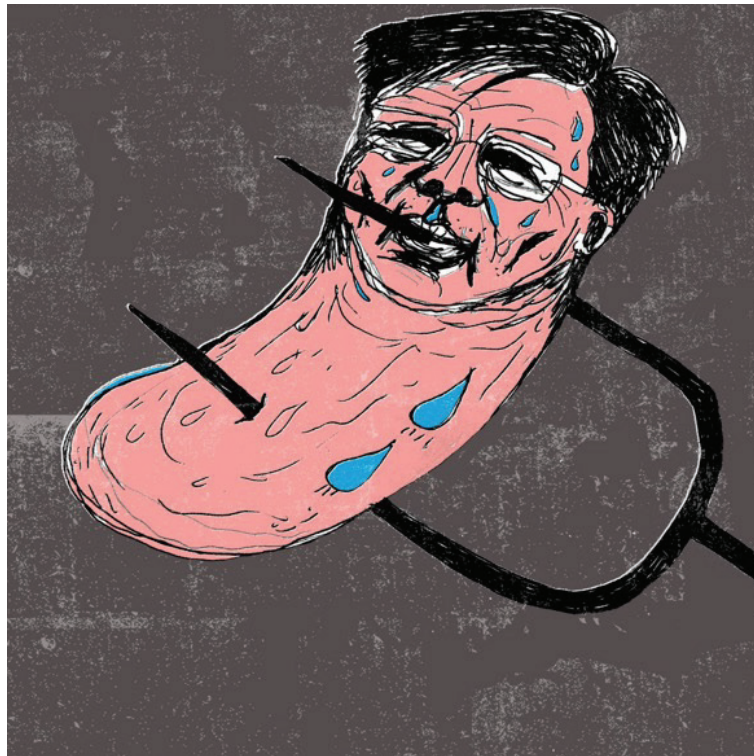
(Figure 3. Caricature of a lawmaker in Hong Kong titled "Sausage". Image source: Telegram group)

d. Explanation

To gain the support of the public, protesters understood the importance of ensuring both the demonstrators and the citizen comprehended why they were taking to the streets. The Anti-ELAB protest involved intricate concepts, and there was a recognized need to distil this information in an easily understandable manner. In response, some artists began creating small booklets detailing the protest's background in both Chinese and English, catering to an international audience and ensuring that the movement's objectives were clear to all.

As the movement progressed, protesters found this approach effective and began expanding its use to encompass other content areas. They saw this format as a valuable tool for civic education. As a result, some publications utilized straightforward graphics to explain political terms like "Dehumanization," "Discrimination," and "Polarization." (Fig. 4a-c) One artist even employed a series of images to analyze Taiwan's political situation as a consequence of the Hong Kong protests. Another initiated an "English Classroom," teaching individuals how to discuss the protest in English.

Moreover, while many of these materials were geared toward external readers, some were crafted with the protesters' practical needs in mind. These guides offered advice on topics such as "How to removing tear gas from your body" and "what actions to take if arrested".

(Figure. 4a)

(Figure. 4b)

(Figure. 4c)

(Figure 4a-c, A series of work titled "10 stages of Genocide". Image source: Facebook)

e. Propaganda

Drawing from the visual language of traditional propaganda, these artworks aimed to craft a heroic portrayal of the protesters, emphasizing their courage and unwavering determination. Phrases like "Together We Fight, and the Sun Will Rise" appeared in a series of illustrations, signalling the promise and hope that the protest aimed to bring about, and beckoning viewers to unite with their cause.

Such works also played a pivotal role in delineating the "us vs. them" narrative. To solidify the kinship identity often referred to as "brotherhood" (手足), one illustrator presented portraits of diverse groups - students, parents, journalists, first-aiders - accompanied by the powerful message, "Who are we beneath the mask? We are Hongkongers. I report, I defend the truth." Another poignant illustration extended gratitude to professions like first-aiders, doctors, nurses, firefighters, lawyers, social workers, and journalists, carrying the message of "Thanks for standing with us" (Fig 5). While it's acknowledged that many from these professions were simply upholding their duties, such artworks deftly illustrated the unity and shared values across various segments of society in the face of adversity.

(Figure. 5 Image source: Facebook)

f. Documentation

Numerous artworks functioned as visual records of the Anti-ELAB protests. Drawing largely from journalistic photographs or screenshots from news live streams, artists imbued these moments with their unique style. While some endeavored to stay true to the original images, others leaned into exaggeration. These pieces preserved not only the major moments, like the 721 incidents or the storming of the Legislative Council Complex on 1st July, but also subtler, poignant moments captured by photographers. A notable example is a watercolor rendition of a couple, masks donned, sharing a

kiss – a reimagining of a photograph that became emblematic of the movement's emotional depth. (Fig. 6) Other watercolors by the same artist highlighted the movement's gentler facets.

These artworks, beyond simply chronicling events, provided alternate lenses through which the protests could be viewed, thanks to diverse artistic treatments. The rapid proliferation of these pieces underscored artists' adaptive working models during the protests. Leveraging news from social media and online streams, and aided by the swift dissemination of journalistic images, artists could respond in near real-time. Even if physically absent from the epicenters of action, they effectively "reported" incidents through their creations. This sense of "reporting" aligns with the wider movement's ethos, where participants identified and assumed roles organically. For instance, the artist behind "Resist Girl Diary" used a diary format to depict daily protest scenes, mimicking the style and tone of news reports in both word and image.

(Figure.6 Image source: Facebook)

Internal Functions

a. Rally

These works served two primary purposes. The first was to act as a reminder of their core demands. Messages and slogans such as "Fight for Freedom", "Stand with Hong Kong", and "Hong Kong, add oil!", "Five Demands, Not One Less" and the now-forbidden "Liberate Hong Kong, Revolution of Our Times" were commonly seen in the images. The second purpose was to help building the solidarity among the protesters, an element that played a crucial role in the sustained duration of the protests. Despite many not knowing each other and coming from varied political affiliations, with historic

divisions between the radical and moderate camps, there was an undeniable unity when confronting perceived threats from the police. Slogans like "Do Not Split", "Together We Fight", "You Are Not Alone", and "Unity is Strength" reinforced this sentiment. Some artworks were particularly impactful, crafted to ensure that those arrested, referred to as "brothers", were not forgotten.

The artworks also charted the evolving emotions and sentiments of the protesters. Initially, the motivating cry was "Hong Kongers, add oil!" As the movement progressed, this transformed to "Hong Kongers, Revolt!" and culminated in "Hong Kongers, Revenge!" towards its end. While many artworks adopted a forthright and robust style, there was also an element of subtlety. Some integrated the core messages into thematic contexts, such as posters related to the Mid-Autumn Festival or Christmas. As the movement wound down, images reminiscent of spring couplets began to emerge, blending tradition with the spirit of protest.

(Figure. 7 Title in translation: God Bless our brothers. Image source: Facebook)

b. Mobilisation

Mobilization, from a leader's standpoint, was perhaps the most vital function. In the absence of a centralized organizer, it was crucial for protesters to disseminate information about protests, such as timing and location, especially during the later stages featuring numerous smaller-scale "fluid protests." Illustrations and posters proved invaluable for this purpose. Large amount of works was created as event posters. It's

noteworthy that these artworks weren't exclusive to protests; they played a pivotal role throughout the movement in various events such as petition signing, strikes, and the Hong Kong Local Elections.

These illustrative pieces were particularly effective during smaller-scale actions. Throughout the period of the protests, activists initiate campaigns within their communities. For instance, there was a campaign that encouraged people to shout a particular slogan from their windows at 10 pm every night, with the hope that neighbours would respond with a counter-slogan (Fig. 8a). Illustrations were crafted to promote such initiatives. However, on the eve of a new school term, recognizing that students might have earlier bedtimes, the action time was moved to 9 pm (Fig. 8b). Consequently, new illustrations were developed to update the community about this change. This dynamic and adaptive interaction underscores the symbiotic relationship between the protesters and artists, emphasizing the adaptability and mutual understanding that permeated the movement.
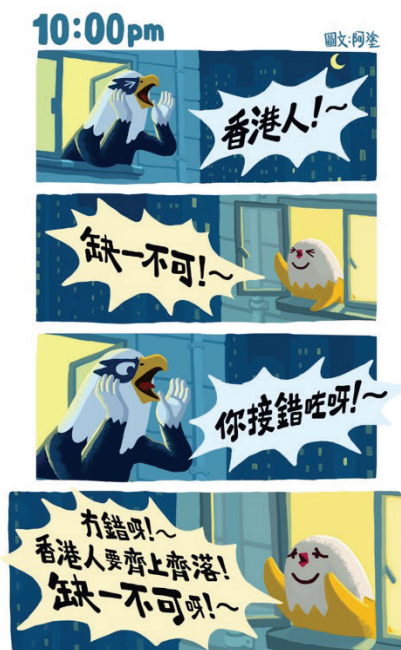

Figure. 8a   Figure 8b

(Figure. 8a-b Artworks by AhTo. Image source: Artist's Facebook page)

c. Tactic

Strategy formulation without a central leader can be challenging. The protesters leveraged platforms like LiHKG and dedicated working groups to plan actions and fine-tune details. Still, to ensure collective consensus and unity, it was essential for everyone to be on the same page. This necessitated a culture of dialogue and consensus-building, where artworks played a pivotal role in informing, persuading, and reminding participants.

There were primarily two categories of visual content. The first revolved around practical protest tactics. This encompassed recommended protest clothing, protection strategies (Fig. 9), and guidelines on what actions to take or avoid during the protests. As the protests evolved, so did the communication methods among participants. Specialized codes, phrases, and even hand signals were used to coordinating large groups. Visual aids helped teach and reinforce these codes among participants, ensuring that even in the heat of the moment, there was a unified response.

The second category of visual content focused on tactics to maintain community solidarity and trust. These artworks provided guidance on managing internal disputes, emphasizing mutual respect among all protesters (Fig. 10). The significance of trust was underscored, especially given the potential presence of undercover police officers. Therefore, there were a number of works emphasising "Do not catch the ghost". By reinforcing the ethos of unity and trustworthiness, these visuals helped maintain a cohesive front against external threats.

(Figure.9 Image source: Facebook)

(Figure 10. Translated title: Brothers, when we have different opinions, we should speak out but don't forget to listen. Image source: Facebook)

d. Consolation

The prolonged six-month protests deeply affected Hong Kong's daily life and citizens' mental well-being. The continuous unrest birthed considerable psychological stress, with growing rifts among families and friends over political allegiances becoming a concerning societal issue.

For the protesters, particularly the youth, the challenges were manifold. While they grappled with familial pressures on one side, they also faced the emotional trauma from witnessing violent incidents, arrests of comrades, and tragic fatalities. In response to these complex emotional landscapes, a collection of artworks emerged, aiming to comfort and console the protesters. (Fig. 11)

These artworks also addressed the broader mental well-being of the community, offering advice on leading a fulfilling life and nurturing hope for a return to normalcy. Such pieces bolstered the determination and camaraderie among the protesters, reminding them of their collective strength and purpose.

(Figure 11. Image source: Facebook)

e. Ideology

During the Anti-ELAB protests, certain ideological tenets provided spiritual sustenance to the protesters, with "Be Water" standing out prominently. This phrase, drawn from legendary martial artist Bruce Lee's philosophy, seemingly embodies lessons gleaned from past experiences. The principles of being "formless" and "flexible" were viewed as effective strategies when dealing with the police, especially when compared to the Umbrella Movement, which was an occupation-style protest anchored in fixed locations.

This theme, "Be Water," was echoed in many artworks, reinforcing its ethos among the protesters. For them, it was more than just a tactical mantra for evading the police; it symbolized a deeper attitude and philosophy towards the entire movement. Other

resonating slogans like "Ideas are bulletproof," "We share the same values," and "Protect your Heart" were also prevalent throughout the protests. The proliferation of such slogans not only galvanized the protesters but also prompted the wider public to introspect on the profound significance underlying the movement.

(Figure 12. Image source: Facebook)

f. Self-Expression

Artworks in this category weren't crafted with a distinct function for the movement in mind. Instead, they acted as personal expressions of the artists. Many serve as immediate artistic reactions to events, akin to visual diaries. Their themes varied widely, from straightforward reactions to news broadcasts, to abstract designs, or even playful visual puns crafted for self-encouragement. These pieces exhibited a breadth of expressive techniques. Unlike the more targeted propaganda or mobilization artworks, these personal expressions delved into a deeper, more human dimension, often leaning towards abstract interpretations.

(Figure 13. Image source: Facebook)

Factors that facilitate the Evolution of Collective Creativity

A Spectrum of Artists: Diverse Contributions in Unity

The Anti-ELAB protests showcased a stark difference in the role of artists compared to the Umbrella Movement. In 2014, a handful of notable artists took the lead, but in 2019, the artistic landscape expanded to include a diverse array of contributors. This broadened participation introduced varied perspectives and styles into the movement.

Editorial Cartoonists: These traditional artists, typically publishing in newspapers and magazines, employed classic storytelling techniques. Their political cartoons, rich in commentary, were rooted in conventional mediums and styles.

Online Political Cartoonists: Emerging primarily post the Umbrella Movement, these artists didn't shy away from personal viewpoints. Operating mainly online, they enjoyed significant influence, especially among the youth. Some even garnered followings exceeding 100K on social media platforms. Their direct, contemporary style resonated with a younger audience.

Commercial Illustrators: Historically neutral regarding politics, these artists became actively engaged during the Anti-ELAB movement. Their works typically mirrored immediate events and personal emotions, diverging from in-depth commentary.

Overseas Artists: This category largely refers to Chinese exiled artists like Badiucao, Daxiong, and RebelPepper. Their participation, a rarity in past Hong Kong protests,

indicated the movement's broader implications beyond local issues. Given their backgrounds and their international exposure, their art featured more conventional aesthetics, occasionally employing dated or overt symbols, like the dragon representing China.

Members of the "Publicity Group": This diverse group remained anonymous, featuring individuals from various sectors, including some from the creative industry. Instead of individual creations, they responded to requests from protesters, crafting artworks that catered to specific needs and events.

The confluence of these diverse talents meant that the movement's artistic output reached a broad spectrum of the population. This collective creativity allowed the protests to resonate on multiple levels, making its impact more profound than in prior movements, where the narrative was primarily shaped by a narrower group of political cartoonists.

Even though the artists involved in the Anti-ELAB movement never officially formed a structured group, their spirit of collaboration was evident. This synergy was especially pronounced during specific campaigns. For example, in August, when protesters initiated a strike action, these artists didn't just produce individual works. Instead, they embarked on a collective project. Using Facebook, they invited fellow artists to co-create a vast image, much like jointly signing a petition, by adding their own character to other's work. This united effort drew participation from hundreds of artists, resulting in a compelling piece of collaborative art in merely two days. (Fig. 14) Interestingly, this approach echoed a past initiative from the Anti-National Education Movement in 2012. Back then, a similar collective action drew participation from over a thousand individuals.

(Figure 14. Image source: Facebook)

As artists fostered a tacit understanding with one another, they became adept at swiftly responding to events and initiating collective actions. Leveraging common themes, they would produce aligned imagery in a short span, as seen with the "Eye for HK" campaign, a direct response to the incident where a girl was shot in the eye [5], and the Pocari incident [6]. Such endeavours resonate with notable on-ground protest strategies, like the 30-mile human chain [7], where participants showcased their solidarity by connecting with each other. The artists seamlessly transformed this sense of unity and collective resilience into their artwork.

The Anti-ELAB protest marked the dawn of an age of collective creativity, where individual prominence gracefully stepped aside for the collective mission. Esteemed artists proactively incorporated their creations into the communal "public sea", underscoring a transition from individual recognition to collective upliftment. The multifaceted roles these artworks played underscores the artists' astute understanding of their most effective contributions to the ongoing protest narrative. As such, certain artists focused on specific areas, addressing distinct needs of the movement. For instance, the group Small Potato Do Stuff zeroed in on educational endeavours, crafting informative booklets to explain the intricacies of the protest for the public. Resist Girl Diary adopted the mantle of a visual journalist, offering a pictorial chronicle of the unfolding events. Artists like Humchuk honed his skills to produce art that offered comfort during trying times. This targeted approach ensured that the myriad needs of the protest were comprehensively addressed. It resonates with the organic role distribution among protesters, as seen in specialized Telegram working groups, imbuing the movement with a more defined identity.

Resource Sharing and the Embrace of Open-Source Ethos

In the context of its decentralization, the Anti-ELAB protest was described as "open source" model [8], signifying that protesters were encouraged to adapt and personalize existing ideas. This openness fostered an environment ripe for creativity; individuals willingly surrendered the ownership of their works, valuing the collective benefit and endorsing the myriad adaptations that emerged. Moreover, this setup offered a playground for innovation, unhindered by excessive risks.

This collaborative ethos resonated profoundly within the publicity groups on Telegram

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[5]   In response to the incident where a girl claimed to have been shot in the eye by police during a protest in August 2019, the 'eye4HK' campaign was launched. As a form of solidarity, artists began creating portraits featuring the right eye obscured.

[6]   Artists launched a campaign to support the beverage brand Pocari, which chose to pull its advertisements from TVB, Hong Kong's largest pro-government television broadcaster.

[7]   On August 23, a peaceful demonstration took the form of a 30-kilometer human chain stretching across Hong Kong, including both sides of the harbor. Participants joined hands and sang songs on pavements, overpasses, in parks, and most notably at Lion Rock.

[8]   In a July 2019 interview with Hong Kong Free Press, scholar Francis Li likened the protesters' organizational approach to that of open-source technology, where an initial code is proposed, and then various individuals adapt and expand upon it to create their own projects.

and Facebook. It's evident that artists weren't merely creating for self-expression but recognized the importance of collective creation. To this end, some artworks were crafted as templates, inviting others to personalize and adapt. For instance, during the protests, certain artists released templates detailing the step-by-step construction of popular icons like the LIHKG-PIG and Pepe the Frog in a grid format. Using these templates as guides, protesters and citizens could reproduce the image using sticky notes. (Fig. 15) Moreover, they had the freedom to introduce variations to the original design.
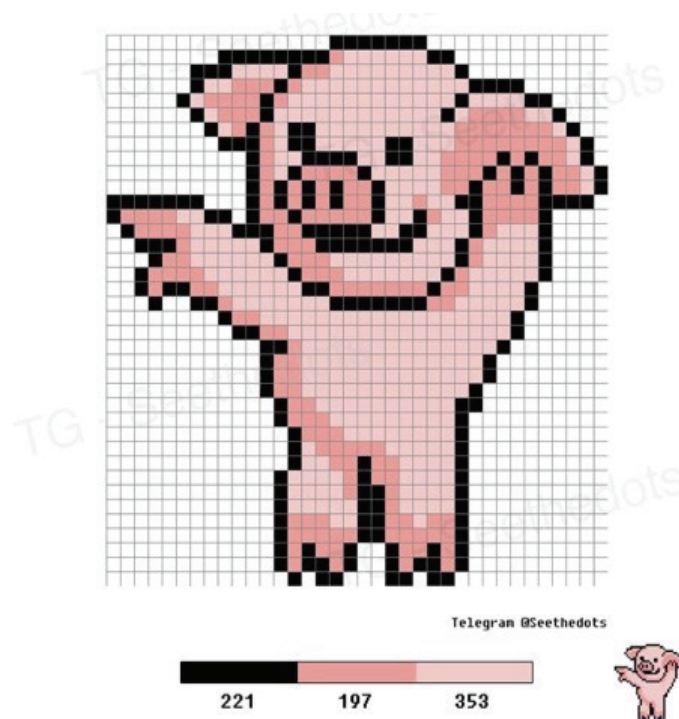
(Figure 15. Image source: Telegram group)

Another intriguing example of this ethos was initiated by Apple Daily, a newspaper shuttered by the government. On 4 July, their front page emerged almost bare, save for a short statement: "When press freedom is unreasonably suppressed…". This minimalist approach beckoned artists and the public to embellish the vacant space with their doodles, aligning with the statement's sentiment, and subsequently sharing their creations on social media. Although not a novel endeavour for the newspaper to assert its stance, it granted readers an unparalleled opportunity to engage. This endeavour aptly epitomizes the protestor's strategy: maximizing impact while optimizing resources.

Lastly, a creative resurgence was observed in the reappropriation of iconic artworks. Renowned pieces like Francisco Goya's "Saturn Devouring His Son," Michelangelo's "The Creation of Adam," Edward Hopper's "Nighthawks," and Delacroix's "Liberty Leading the People" were reimagined in the context of the protests. Likewise, pop culture imprints, like posters from the Japanese animation Akira (Fig. 16) and Star Wars graphics, found renewed purpose. While such adaptations may not strictly fit the "open-source" label, they underscore the contemporary inclination towards leveraging existing resources for new narratives.

(Figure. 16 A reinterpreted artwork based on the movie poster of the animated file 'Akria'. Image source: Artist's Facebook page)

Resources have always played a pivotal role in protests. During the Umbrella Movement, protesters in Hong Kong cultivated a culture of communal living and resource-sharing within the occupied sites. By 2019, with no physical occupation to serve as a hub, this ethos of sharing naturally evolved and adapted to the digital landscape. Tangible resources once crucial in the occupied territories were transformed into digital assets, easily accessible, modifiable, and distributable across the online platforms. In this digital arena, political cartoons and propagandistic artworks have been weaponized, serving as powerful tools to communicate, persuade, and mobilize as mentioned in the last section.

The inception of the "Public Sea" has notably altered the dynamics between the artist and the audience, revolutionizing the way artworks are disseminated and consumed. More critically, it has democratized the creation of protest art. No longer constrained

by the need for professional skills or tools, everyone is empowered to craft and share their own works. This communal, participative approach to art creation and sharing underscores a significant shift in the landscape of protest art, mirroring the broader, decentralized, and collaborative spirit of the protests themselves.

Lennon Walls: Emergence of Hybrid Spaces

While the social media platform was paramount in broadcasting protest artwork during the Anti-ELAB protest, Lennon Walls added a physical, tangible dimension to this narrative. These walls, which originated as mere spaces where protesters expressed their views using sticky notes, drew inspiration from the original Lennon Wall in Prague , and flourished during the Umbrella Movement. Unlike the singular, centralized Lennon Wall of the Admiralty in 2014, 2019 saw a proliferation of such walls across the city. Spaces such as tunnels, flyovers, and other public zones transformed into spontaneous canvases adorned with sticky notes, posters, hand-drawn illustrations, slogans, and even printouts of the latest news reports. Intriguingly, many contributions to these walls, unlike the digital art on social media, came from ordinary citizens who might not be categorized as "protesters."

These Lennon Walls seamlessly blended the physical and digital realms. Many would find artwork from the "public sea" online and reproduce them on the walls. The spaces themselves allowed for a diverse array of expressions: from ceilings and stairs to floors. Some iconic locations, like a pedestrian tunnel in Tai Po, transformed into immersive galleries, with every possible surface bearing a message or artwork.

Yet, as these walls multiplied, they became sites of contention. Clashes with pro-government factions, who attempted to deface or destroy the Lennon Walls, led protesters to innovate. Traditional sticky notes evolved into sturdier mediums like tiles or laminated artwork. Some areas even witnessed large-scale printouts of iconic images, rendering these spaces into expansive public galleries. This evolution signalled a shift in the mindset of the artists; many started crafting works explicitly for these walls, with some even providing high-resolution files suitable for large-scale printing.

The Lennon Walls can be perceived as an alternate form of occupation, filling the void left by the lack of physical occupations in the 2019 protests. These walls transformed spaces, making them daily spectacles and, even after removal, left indelible marks that would serve as collective memories. They also broadened the reach of the movement, bridging the digital "public sea" with real-world spaces and drawing in those less engaged with social media. This synthesis of the digital and the tangible fostered a hybrid space, reminiscent of tactics like using AirDrop to disseminate digital flyers in demonstrations, blending the lines between the online and offline worlds.

Protest Aesthetics Reimagined

Beyond the external dynamics and structural framework that fostered collective creativity, there lies the critical examination of the artworks themselves. Given the myriad backgrounds they emerged from, the movement was replete with a plethora of graphic styles and narrative techniques. While many pieces can be understood within traditional artistic frameworks, several, particularly those borne from the public, challenge conventional categorization.

However, a common thread weaving through many of these artworks is their jovial, light-hearted manner, often contrasting starkly with the tumultuous backdrop of the protests. This is evident in the comedic undertones and humour embedded within, exemplified by the widespread usage of characters such as the LIHKG-Pig and Pepe the Frog, which eventually evolved into the protest's symbolic "mascot" (Figure. 17). The former, a pixelated emoji originally from the LIHKG forum, captured hearts with its adorable design. Conversely, Pepe the Frog, an internet meme sometimes associated with controversial ideologies, took on neutral, ever-shifting roles in these artworks — from protester to police. (Fig. 18a-c) These symbols, to protesters, became fluid mediums for meaning generation.

(Figure. 17 The character LIHKG-Pig were often seen in Lennon Walls. Image source: Facebook)

Figure 18a   Figure 18b   Figure 18c

(Figure. 18a-c Pepe the Frog were depicted as different characters in a poster series created by an unknown artist. Image source: Telegram group)

Furthermore, an array of icons from popular culture were intertwined with the movement's visual narrative:

Superheroes: Dr. Strange, Spiderman, The Hulk, Venom

Cartoons: Mickey Mouse, Baymax, Winnie the Pooh, Power Rangers, Donald Duck, Kumamon, Power Rangers, Southwark, SpongeBob SquarePants, The Smurfs

Japanese anime: Gundum, Totoro, Slam Dunk, Naruto, One Piece, Pokemon, Doramon, One-Punch Man, Weathering with You, Dragon Ball, Anpanman, Death Note, Akira, Attack on Titan

Movies or TV series: God Father, Harry Potter, Joker, V for Vendetta, Ip Man, Game of Thrones, Winter on Fire, Young and Dangerous, Kamen Rider, Journey to the West, Infernal Affairs, Toy Story, Teletubbies, Terminator, Star Wars, Mulan, Ultraman

Hong Kong Comics: Master Q, The Storm Warrior

Religious figures: God, Buddha, Guanyin

Historical figures: Sun Yat San, Guan Yu

This incorporation of pop culture might be expected given its allure to younger generations, but the underlying reasons for such choices warrant introspection. The upswing of characters like LIHKG-Pig and Pepe the Frog marked a significant transition from the customary visual tropes of protest art. Historically, protests often leveraged characters such as V from "V for Vendetta" that embodied heroism and challenges to authority, ensuring that their graphical representations closely mirrored the values and objectives of the movement. This alignment underscored the ideals the protesters stood for.

However, the Anti-ELAB movement's preference for characters like the LIHKG-Pig, which might appear "meaningless" or incongruous to some, signifies a departure from the traditional significance attributed to visual representation in protests.

The seemingly arbitrary adoption of the LIHKG-Pig (notwithstanding its counter-part, the LIHKG-Dog) offers a deeper understanding within a broader context — the diminishing necessity for iconic, "elite" protest symbols like V for Vendetta. This shift harmonizes with the leaderless paradigm that permeated the entire movement. When viewed through this lens, the embrace of any character, irrespective of its conventional "meaning" or lack thereof, becomes a tangible manifestation of the "Be Water" strategy. The fluidity in choosing symbols, echoing the adaptability and resilience of the movement itself, encapsulated the protest's core ethos.

Conclusion

In this study, I have outlined the various roles that artwork has assumed within the Anti-ELAB movement, encompassing both external and internal functions. The spectrum of these roles unveils areas unexplored by previous protests. Especially noteworthy within the leaderless setting were functions that conveyed tactical information and addressed the emotional aspects of the protest. This comprehensive list of functions signifies that artist, instead of simply creating artworks to broadly support the movement, were keenly aware of the specific needs from the protesters' perspective. These changes in the work spectrum have transformed artists' roles into contributors facilitating the entire movement. This also mirrors the protesters' inclination to spot-light different roles—from journalists and first-aiders to lawyers—a tactic for forming various "departments" in a leaderless organization. Such role assignments enable individuals to participate in the movement with a clearer identity.

The expansive spectrum of work results from collective efforts, shaped by several factors under unique circumstances. Social media played a pivotal role in forming a cluster of artists from diverse backgrounds, enabling them to work independently yet in a collective manner. The infrequent presence of Chinese exile artists showcases the broader impact of the movement on China's issues, and their involvement marks a breakthrough in aligning overseas artists through the internet. The open-source culture, which developed from the leaderless setting, has significantly enhanced the sharing of digital assets, including artworks, through a decentralized network. The establishment of the 'public sea,' a public archive collecting images and artworks on Facebook and Telegram, has transformed the means of artwork dissemination. Conversely, the paradigm shifts in visual style—from an 'elite' class, previously represented by the use of 'V for Vendetta,' to the arbitrary and 'meaningless' LIHKG-Pig and Pepe the Frog—has permitted artists and protesters to adopt any visual elements without restrictions. The vast amount of reappropriated works from masterpieces and internet memes reflects the arbitrary nature of the artworks.

Lastly, the emergence of Lennon Walls throughout the city materialized the 'Be Water' ethos, presenting an alternative method of space occupation. The transition of art-works from social media platforms to physical sites has magnified the impact of the

works, capturing broader attention, especially among those who do not utilize social media. It also altered the manner in which artists work, as the format of Lennon Walls continually evolved. New materials and display methods were devised in response to pro-government citizens destroying the Lennon Walls. The immersive ambiance created by the artworks, especially when large-scale posters were displayed in later stages, has crafted a spectacular scene, indelibly imprinted in the city's memory.

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