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Hong Kong's Networked Agitprop: Popular Nationalism in the Wake of the 2019 Anti-Extradition Protests

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Abstract

Hong Kong's protest movements have created a repertoire of symbolism in artworks and artefacts that make statements about the political status of the city. This article analyses the protest art that emerged during the 2019 anti-extradition protests. We explore how actors produced a sense of “Hong Kong-ness” and distributed political meanings through networked agitprop: a form of strategic communication that links people and ideas together in both physical and digital contexts, through emotional appeals in the service of a grassroots political programme. By analysing examples of such agitprop, we show how the movement organically constructed networks of meaning to promote its ideas of people, nation, and even independence. However, we also find that the commitment to nationalist frames of reference ultimately prevents such art from re-imaging Hong Kong outside the confines of nations and that it even inadvertently reproduces the systems of power it ostensibly sets out to challenge.

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Keywords

Agitprop, Hong Kong, nationalism, networks, propaganda, protest art, visual communication

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Introduction

A Chinese New Year's market in Hong Kong, 2020: visitors are milling past food stalls, flower stands, and vendors selling holiday goods such as mandarins, lucky charms, and adorable plush-toy versions of rat and mice, the zodiac animal of that year. Among the commodities on offer are Hong-Kong-themed items, ranging from computer mice with the slogan “I really fucking love Hong Kong” (我哋真係好撻鍾意香港, *ngodei zanhai ho lan zungji Heunggong*) to T-shirts and keychains (see Figure 1) stating

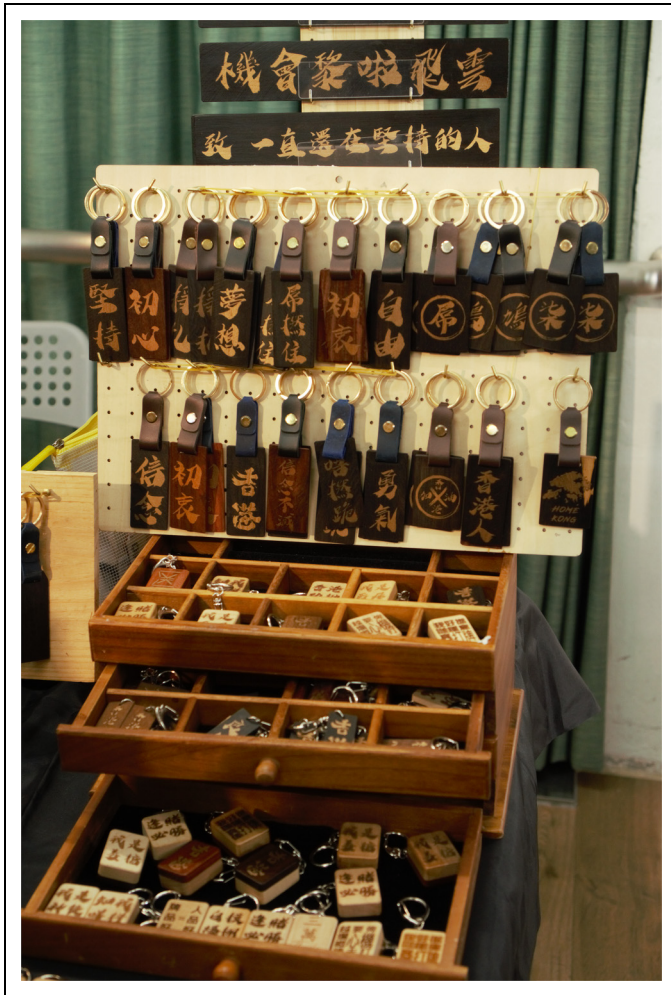


Figure 1. A stall at a yellow market selling keychains with messages of support.
Source: Image author 2021.

“I am a Hong Konger,” some substituting the words Hong Kong with “Home Kong.” For HKD 100 to 250 (USD 20 to 30), New Year’s shoppers can wear their local belonging on their sleeves.

Hong Kong people today are inundated with imagery and slogans that stem from Hong Kong’s local culture, society, history, and previous protest movements. These cultural expressions are juxtaposed with the near-global imagery of transnational entertainment and politics. From June 2019 to January 2020, a wide-spanning protest movement made ample use of these available semiotic resources, rearranging and distributing them via digital and physical methods. During this time, the protesters arranged weekly demonstrations, some of which attracted hundreds of thousands of participants (see *Reuters*, 2021 for a timeline). Graffiti, posters, and walls with post-its and stickers (so-called “Lennon Walls”) were a major part of these efforts, and they visibly transformed public space (see Ismangil, 2020 for examples).

The protests originally targeted a proposed amendment to extradition ordinances that would allow extradition of prisoners to the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Many saw this as a sign of increasing integration with the mainland and its legal system. Critics feared that the extradition bill would deteriorate the rule of law (HKFP, 2020a). As frustrations grew, the protests came to capture many of the political concerns in Hong Kong, in particular, regarding autonomy and universal suffrage. Police brutality and lack of accountability were additional grievances. These concerns crystallized in the protesters’ five demands: withdrawal of the extradition bill; an independent inquiry into police violence; the retraction of the classification of protests as riots; amnesty for arrested protesters; and universal suffrage.

While the government withdrew the extradition bill in September 2019, altercations between protesters and the police over the remaining demands turned increasingly violent throughout late 2019 (see Lo et al., 2021). In June 2020, the National People’s Congress in Beijing escalated by passing a wide-sweeping National Security Law (NSL) that introduced anti-secessionist language into the annexe of Hong Kong’s Basic Law. The new regulation now punishes crimes of “subversion, secession, terrorism or colluding with foreign forces” by up to life imprisonment, and it has had chilling effects on civic activism, freedom of speech, and press freedom in the city (Luqiu, 2021: Chapter 8).

The 2019 movement evolved from earlier protest traditions. It drew heavily on an established repertoire of imagery familiar to many from, for instance, the 2014 umbrella movement (Lam and Cooper, 2017). The protests of 2019 extended this use of images, rituals, and media practices to present-day cultural and political concerns, in a transnational context (Ku, 2020). These practices turned public space into explicitly political space (if urban space was ever non-political; see Harvey, 2006). They included daily rituals, for example, singing (protest) songs in shopping malls or organising lunchtime protests in the business districts, which became a popular strategy for creating collective meanings. Importantly, they included a constantly shifting collage of images and text, in different languages, which protest artists deftly recombined and recontextualised to make political claims, appeal to emotions, and evoke a sense of community.



Figure 2. Iconography infused with political ideology.

Source: Images collected from the Hong Kong Free Press database (HKFP, 2020b).

Take the examples shown in Figure 2, which combines the words “Hong Kong independence” with iconic visual representations of the city. This includes a map of Hong Kong (left), outlining its territory in a way familiar to audiences from daily weather reports or maps of the metro system; it also includes a lion with wings (right), an allusion to Lion Rock, a famous mountain in Hong Kong said to be shaped like a lion. Such juxtapositions imbue familiar representations with new political meaning, in this case suggesting that a geographical outline should be understood as an independent political territory or implying that a landmark has come to life to assure independence and “national self-strengthening” (民族自強, *Manjuk Jikeun*).

In this article, we examine what role such protest art played during the 2019 anti-extradition movement. (Posters and other artworks are reproduced for academic purposes, under fair use. Reproduction does not necessarily mean endorsement.) Specifically, we ask how acts and artefacts of visual political communication strategically produced a sense of “Hong Kong-ness,” which gradually turned into a form of contested nationalism. To explore this issue, and after briefly outlining the methods and aims of this study, we first discuss how social and political agitation influences the construction of nations and nationalism. We then review Hong Kong’s evolving relationship with the PRC and the role localism and nationalism play in those relations. We also discuss how identity has shifted in Hong Kong in the wake of recent social movements. Finally, we explore empirically how actors organise and distribute political meanings through what we call “networked agitprop”: a form of strategic communication that links people and ideas together in both physical and digital contexts. Networked agitprop works through emotional appeals in the service of a grassroots political programme, using available repertoires of popular art and culture.

By analysing examples of such agitprop, our study examines how the movement organically constructed networks of meaning to promote its ideas of people, nation, and even independence. However, as we argue based on our findings, the commitment to nationalist frames of reference ultimately prevents such art from re-imagining Hong

Kong outside of the limiting confines of nations, and it even inadvertently reproduces the wider system of power it ostensibly sets out to challenge.

Studying Hong Kong's Protest Art: Methods and Aims

Our research focuses on protest art created within the context of the 2019 anti-extradition bill movement. This includes the posters and banners posted online and in public space to agitate, provoke, and activate viewers towards action. These can range from posters with future protest dates, reminders of solidarity and (protest) events, or the repetition of key slogans such as “We will never surrender,” or “One nation, one Hong Kong.” Such activist art has been a significant element of protests and social movements in the city. During the anti-extradition bill protests, Lennon Walls, graffiti, and posters were visible all over Hong Kong, and bare walls near high-traffic areas would fill in minutes with visual art.

Many of these images are circulated online and shared on social media such as Instagram, Facebook, Telegram, and local websites. They would then be turned into physical media and spread around Hong Kong, with certain shops and restaurants changing their decoration to highlight support for the cause. The images analysed in this article range from 2019 to 2020, when the anti-extradition bill movement was at its zenith. In the wake of the Covid pandemic, and especially soon after the enactment of the NSL, protest posters all but disappeared from public life.

Our material is drawn from public online databases that host and archive these artworks, as well as from our encounters with such art, in Hong Kong or online. We took our materials primarily from two archives, the Internet Archive's “Hong Kong Protest Collection” (IA, 2019) and the (now defunct) “Hong Kong Protest Movement Data Archive: Poster Search Engine” by Hong Kong Free Press (HKFP, 2020b). As the images often ranged into the thousands, we selected a sub-set based on recurring themes. To arrive at a sample that could be analysed qualitatively, we queried the two databases for key terms related to Hong Kong identity and political aspirations, such as “Hong Kong independence” (香港獨立, *Heunggong duklaap*), “Hong Kongers” (香港人, *Heungongyahn*), and “Hong Kong identity” (香港身分, *Heunggong sanfan*). This yielded an initial sample of 650 artworks. We categorised the artworks based on common visuals and discourses, using the kind of inductive coding process familiar from grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss, 2008) and discourse analysis (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002). After comparing and collapsing the results of this first coding pass, and drawing connections between the categories, we sorted the sample again while simultaneously cross-referencing the images with the broader archives and further internet searches. For the full analysis, we then selected from our corpus the artworks that represented the most common and recurring visual codes, themes, and patterns, which we consider to generally represent the larger discourse of Hong Kong identity, localism, and (sometimes) nationalism, within the context of the anti-extradition movement.

To analyse these works, we follow the methodology and theoretical premises of political iconography and visual communication analysis (e.g. Müller and Geise, 2015: 189–196; Rose, 2007: Chapter 5), specifically the semiotics work of Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001), whose “multi-modal discourse analysis” approach recognises the interplay between signifiers in different modes, for instance, the interaction between language and image. We also explored how these multi-modal cultural artefacts behaved within wider “actor-networks” of meaning-making and practice that authors such as Latour (2005) have theorised. To this end, we asked several questions of each image, such as how visual elements framed the local context, how they drew from recognisable repertoires of meaning, how they evoked specific emotions, and what role textual components such as slogans played, for instance in creating a sense of “othering” or calling the audience into action. We must be careful, however, when trying to “fixate the meaning of the local,” as Wu (2020) argues. There is no unified meaning to the local and localism in Hong Kong, especially at the time of writing, when the concept remained hyper-mediated and in motion.

To anchor this analysis in the context of Hong Kong identity and localism, we further drew on interviews and ethnographic fieldwork conducted as part of one of the author’s PhD research. This included fifteen semi-structured interviews with people associated with the movement (activists, lawyers, educators, and business owners), conducted from 2019 to 2022, each lasting between one and three hours. These interviews were about Hong Kong identity and localism and were conducted after receiving ethics approval from the university board. Informed consent was given at the beginning and end of the interview or conversation after clearly stating the purpose of the research and confirming that the interview or conversation could be used for possible publication. No interviews were recorded and all speakers were anonymised due to the sensitive nature of the topics. In addition to these formal interviews, the study further included around two dozen spontaneous conversations, for example, with shopkeepers, as well as ethnographic observations, which were captured in the form of field notes during this time. The aim of this fieldwork was to establish how people from Hong Kong interpreted the movement, their own identity, and the relationship between the two. In this article, we isolate only the parts of that research that speak to the socio-historical context that produced the city’s protest art, and to the ideological frameworks that informed it.

By combining visual iconographic analysis and ethnographic exploration of local meaning-making, we hope to make two scholarly contributions, one analytical and one conceptual: firstly, we show how the movement drew on available repertoires of visual and discursive representation to actively intervene in ongoing processes of local identity formation; secondly, we introduce the concept of “networked agitprop” to explain how activist cultural expressions that try to challenge the status quo while simultaneously remaining committed to established ideological parameters can inadvertently trap themselves in what Brown (2017) calls a “box of imagination” (see also Jodice, 2022: 17), in this case: a box circumscribed by nationalism.

Literature Review: Making Sense of Nations and Community in Hong Kong

Nations and nationalism remain contested concepts, especially in sub-national contexts where community, identity, and belonging can be in considerable flux. Before examining empirically how networked agitprop linked to this shifting landscape of identities in Hong Kong, the following sections review scholarship on how media and communication construct nations, what role nationalism plays in Hong Kong, and how consecutive waves of localism have shaped understandings of the nation-ness in the city.

Nations and Political Communication: Flashpoints, Everyday Practice, and the Role of Networked Agitprop

Nationalism, the ideology that makes nations appear as normal, natural building blocks of modern society (Breuilly, 1993; Gellner, 2006 [1983]), is particularly visible during moments of heightened agitation, such as during revolutions or times of crisis. As Brubaker (1996) has argued, nations should be viewed as a category of practice that comes into being during precisely such moments, or what he calls “flashpoints.” Such flashpoints are important events that enflame sentiments and shift discourses, and as such they are crucial for understanding attempts at nation-building, as will also become apparent in the present study.

We take the view that nations are reproduced every day (Billig, 2002). Nations are groups of people who see themselves as collectively based in a territory, which they imagine as a homeland built on beliefs in a collective purpose, shared history, culture, language, or ethnic ancestry, and which they aspire to establish or maintain as a political autonomous unit (Anderson, 2006 [1983]: 6; Schneider, 2018: 43; Smith, 1993: 73). This also means that nations are social: they are taught to new generations through rituals, institutions, and banal communication, discursively constructing the nation as the seemingly natural and logical outcome of a historical process.

Nations are “imagined” (Anderson, 2006 [1983]), much like any community (Balibar, 1990), be it small-scale groups such as clubs, circles of friends, and the family, or more abstract large groups of people who can never hope to know all other members, as is the case for religions, socio-economic classes, professional groups, or special interest groups such as fandoms (Schneider, 2018: 37–43 and 51). What sets national communities apart from other imagined groups is the ambition to secure political sovereignty for its members and institutions. This ambition is at the core of the ideology that establishes and sustains the nation: nationalism. As Smith (1993: 73) wrote, nationalism is “an ideological movement for attaining and maintaining autonomy, unity and identity on behalf of a population deemed by some of its members to constitute an actual or potential ‘nation.’”

Abstract communities such as nations often leverage a sense of shared space and time, which they establish by circulating the symbols of the community and by constructing narratives about ancestry and history. Through mass communication such as print and television (Anderson, 2006 [1983]; Thompson, 1995: 35), elite members of the national

community make the community's abstract relations tangible to a wider audience. However, nationalism is not solely an elite project. It also has a grassroots dimension that shapes its meaning from the ground up, for instance through vernacular culture, folklore, and the kinds of mass discourses that emerge on social media platforms. Social movements are one example of grassroots forces that inject their own understandings of community, belonging, and autonomy into public discourse, for instance through their visual political art.

Such art is also known as "agitprop," a portmanteau of "agitation" and "propaganda." The term has its roots in the Russian Revolution, and specifically in Leninist understandings of political communication (Brown, 2013). In this understanding, traditional propaganda consisted largely of reasoned appeals, meant to explain inequalities to educated elites; its counterpart was emotional agitation, which was meant to mobilize illiterate masses by appealing to their anger at social injustices through theatre, pamphlets, and art. This, then, was Leninist agitational propaganda: a didactical way of transporting ideology to a mass audience via art and performance. The concept would later influence avant-garde art, for example, the "epic theatre" of Erwin Piscator or Bertholt Brecht, but also street art, political comics, and more (see also Jodice, 2022).

While these artistic expressions have been used by reactionary forces such as neo-fascist movements (see Raposo, 2012), and they have arguably also been redeployed by contemporary state propaganda systems such as the PRC's (see Koetse, 2021), they can have a progressive, grassroots thrust. In such contexts, emotive cultural expressions, for instance in the form of satire, can have a community-building function. They are "a participatory activity involving multitudes of people interacting through digital networks," empowering participants to challenge the status quo through ritual-like practices (see Yang and Jiang, 2015: 216). At their most progressive, such cultural expressions aim to "hack" society in the service of justice, or as Jodice (2022: 7) puts it:

Agitprop is a form of expressive storytelling that unsettles the audience and asks them to consider the systematic construction of the world around them. While state actors often employ propaganda to quell resistance, enforce surveillance, and maintain the status quo, agitprop is often a tool of people's movements aiming to do just the opposite.

Agitprop then makes emotional appeals through popular art and culture, in the service of a grassroots political programme. The artistic expressions of popular movements such as those in Hong Kong fit this pattern, and they enable us to take stock of how emotion and political communication come together in contemporary contexts that are characterised by ubiquitous digital media technologies and advanced capitalist networks. Contemporary agitprop is created and shared through digital technologies, which enable members of the movement to connect meanings old and new into novel political messages and to link people and ideas together in both digital and physical realms. In other words, the political work that these actors engage in is, as Bruno Latour (2005: 132) would phrase it, "net-work." It is labour that creates webs of meaning and webs of social relations, through the creative construction of political art.

To reflect this, we propose the term “networked agitprop.” Networked agitprop is a new phenomenon that remains undertheorized in the relevant literature on agitprop; it is made possible by instantaneous digital networking technologies that are always “switched on.” Whereas the Soviet Union’s concerted agitprop outreach was possible due to state control of printing presses and a mobilized workforce (Brown, 2013), Information and Communication Technologies now make it possible for individuals and grassroots organisations to create pictures, upload them, and share them online. They are then readily downloaded, distributed, further adapted, and even printed, by anyone in the world, often within seconds. Such practices not only increase the power of decentralised protesting (Shirkey, 2008), but they make the spread of common symbolism and visual themes easier as well. Networked agitprop is do-it-yourself (DIY) propaganda. And despite its amateur nature and the horizontal structures of its production and distribution networks (or possibly: because of these features), networked agitprop during the 2019 events in Hong Kong created an impressive breadth and variety of protest statements, many dealing with community, identity, and nationalism.

Contradictory Senses of Belonging: Identities and Nationalisms in Hong Kong

Hong Kong has a protracted relation with nationalism that reflects the complicated history of the modern Chinese-speaking world as it unfolded from the nineteenth century onwards. As the Qing empire struggled with domestic challenges and foreign aggression (Zarrow, 2005), Chinese intellectuals took on the challenge of creating the “New China” that was to emerge from the tumultuous collapse of the empire (Duara, 1993; Jenco, 2019; Lam, 2011; Mitter, 2004). As a result, basic matters of category, such as the reach of the new Chinese nation-state, the extent and classification of its people, and the national language and culture were all matters of fierce discussion, as is commonly the case in newly formed nations.

Throughout this time, Hong Kong’s citizens were British subjects. Local education did not promote any national identity along ethnic lines but instead emphasised the kind of liberal civic values relevant in the United Kingdom (UK), such as rule of law and freedom of speech (Tsang, 1995). After Britain’s imperial decline, Hong Kong did not become independent like many other colonies. Instead, the UK transferred jurisdiction to the PRC, which it viewed as the Qing’s successor state. The UK granted a select few Hong Kong elites British citizenship, but most other Hong Kong residents were now PRC citizens.

From the PRC’s perspective, Hong Kong was, is, and remains an inalienable part of China, as is captured in the first article of Hong Kong’s Basic Law. The PRC did not consider Hong Kong a colony and was successful in lobbying the United Nations to remove it from the list of Non-Self-Governing Territories in 1972 (Jiang, 2017), meaning that it would not gain self-determination after its release from the UK. In the rationale of the PRC, the Hong Kong people are Chinese. This stance is evident in the 2021 electoral reform that codifies how only (ethnically) Chinese patriots should rule Hong Kong,

but it is not a new idea. It follows earlier PRC discourses on nation and race, as exemplified by Deng Xiaoping in the 1980s (quoted in Raferty, 1989: 417):

Hong Kong people can rule Hong Kong. Singapore is ruled by people with a yellow face [...]. Members of the future Hong Kong government and its affiliated bodies should basically be patriots [...]. Foreigners can serve as advisers. Patriots must respect the [Chinese] race and should wholeheartedly support China's recovery of sovereignty over Hong Kong.

The PRC government's stress on Chinese "race" as part of Hong Kong citizenship and identity contradicts the dominant discourse of Hong Kong as a global, cosmopolitan city, for instance in the promotional campaigns that present Hong Kong as "Asia's World City," open for business, and featuring a cosmopolitan culture (Ip, 2020). The idea of an open, cosmopolitan Hong Kong implies an inclusive identity that allows anyone to become a Hong Konger, provided they adhere to certain "core values" – a term that interviewees for this research project repeatedly referenced to explain "Hong Kong-ness," and which the government frequently uses as a rhetoric device to frame and legitimate new policies. While the government still claims to uphold these core values, the increased commitment to the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's) governance practices has eroded values such as rule of law and freedom of speech. Consequently, Hong Kong's core values have become something of a fetish among anti-establishment voices, where they evoke feelings of nostalgia for a (perhaps fictitious) better, more liberal Hong Kong.

Because of these contradictions, Hong Kong's citizens have developed ambiguous understandings of the city and its relation to the mainland over time. Encapsulating the complexity of Hong Kong's identity, Mathews (1997: 3) writes:

[...] "Hongkongese" as a cultural identity involves a "Chineseness plus" that has three clusters of meaning: "Chineseness plus affluence/cosmopolitanism/capitalism," "Chineseness plus English/colonial education/colonialism," and "Chineseness plus democracy/human rights/the rule of law."

To Mathews, who was writing on the eve of the handover, the tensions between these clusters of identity boil down to a distinction between "Hong Kong as 'apart' from China" and "Hong Kong as a part of China" (Mathews, 1997: 3). This semantic difference is a crucial site and source of many struggles visible in Hong Kong, including the tensions that characterised consecutive currents of Hong Kong localism.

Hong Kong Localisms and Their Relation to Nationalism

Lo (2008) distinguishes three "waves" of Hong Kong localism. The first wave describes localist awareness among the baby-boomer generation. It followed a surge in migration after World War II, mainly of mainland-Chinese refugees. The true localist push came from the children of these refugees. These second-generation immigrants, who grew

up in the 1960s and 1970s, transformed the city from a place of refuge to a home. This was reflected in a confident local pop-culture scene that came to dominate the region, turning this period into a “golden age.” Later demands, such as the movement that led to Chinese becoming an official language of the colony in 1974, show the progression from livelihood demands to higher-level expectations. Hong Kong’s identity during this time then emerged as an “ambiguous construction that was more than a ‘resident,’ less than a ‘people’” (Turner, 2003: 35).

The second wave of localism was a reaction to the 1984 agreement between the UK and the PRC to hand administrative control to the PRC in 1997. The decision, which had not involved the Hong Kong public, triggered discussions about what it meant to be a Hong Konger as opposed to a (UK/PRC) citizen (Lo, 2008). The 1989 Tiananmen protests and their aftermath were further fuel for these discussions, changing how people in Hong Kong saw their future government. To many, the massacre highlighted the differences between the Hong Kong and Chinese value systems. While the mainland authorities would spend the subsequent decades carefully erasing the events from public conscience, 4 June remained a day of widespread commemorative activities in Hong Kong.

A third wave of localism encapsulated the views and aspirations of the generation born in the 1980s and 1990s (Lo, 2008). Members of this generation reached adulthood after the “golden age,” and their formative years were dominated by the actual handover and its consequences. While China greeted the 1997 handover with great fanfare as Hong Kong’s “return to the motherland” (回歸, *wuigwai*), framing the city as a wayward child returning to its parents, not everyone in Hong Kong felt part of this national “rejuvenation” (復興, *fukhing*). Many experienced the transfer of power as a further loss of agency, and with the memory of the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre still fresh in people’s minds, citizens remained wary of PRC influence. This was reflected in increased civil unrest amidst fears that Hong Kong would lose its autonomy. The 2003 protests over Article 23 of Hong Kong’s Basic Law, which was related to proposed national security amendments, became a touchstone for this new kind of localism (see Fu et al., 2005), but so did the Star Ferry Pier preservation movement in 2006 (Ku, 2012). Each illustrated a core concern of this new wave of localism: civic rights and cultural heritage.

Lo’s observations about these three waves of localism preceded subsequent high-profile social movements, which saw Hong Kong’s localism spread through a booming civil society. This included the aborted decision to make “moral and national education” a compulsory school subject in 2010 (Morris and Vickers, 2015), as well as the controversial electoral reform proposal of 2014 that led to the umbrella movement (Lee and Chan, 2018; Lee and Sing, 2019; Ma and Cheng, 2020). Particularly the events of 2014 enabled localist interests to solidify into different localist political parties, most of which would dissolve following the 2020 NSL. In 2019, these localist actors took on an active role in the anti-extradition movement, which added a new drive to the rationales of growing nationalism (Kwan, 2016) and local identity in the city (Steinhardt et al., 2018). We would argue that this movement and its subsequent developments constitute a fourth wave of localism in Hong Kong, one that reflects the millennial generation of Hong

Kongers and their digitally enhanced sensibilities with regard to autonomy and belonging. Localism does not necessarily coincide with nationalist positions that promote political autonomy for Hong Kong. Granted, some in Hong Kong are scared that Hong Kong will lose its “uniqueness” as the PRC turns Hong Kong into “just another Chinese city,” and some self-identified localists even speak of a “cultural genocide” (Sautman and Yan, 2015: 5). However, many residents still adhere to Chinese cultural traditions, which in Chinese is differentiated by the term *Hua* (華, pronounced *Waa* in Cantonese) and its various iterations (華人, *Waayahn* meaning ethnic Chinese born or outside China; 華裔, *Waajeoi*, ethnic Chinese generally born outside China). The lack of national identity in Hong Kong means the PRC government feels an urgent responsibility to instil a sense of national ethnic belonging in the citizens of Hong Kong. To counter Hong Kong’s localism, the government has been pushing for Hong Kong citizens to align themselves more with China and Chinese nationalism. It has insisted that only patriots should govern Hong Kong, and it has made it illegal to promote Hong Kong nationalism, making the critical public debate about the city’s political status impossible. Hong Kong’s government has also increased PRC-style patriotic education in schools (Cheng, 2021), for example, by adding national security classes to the curriculum, organising mandatory flag-raising days every week, fostering appreciation for the Chinese national anthem, and even scheduling a National Security Education Day in April (Kwan, 2021).

Despite, or perhaps due to, such government efforts to integrate the Hong Kong people, Hong Kong-born citizens increasingly consider themselves to be distinct from China. Many see themselves as “Hong Kongers” and, consequently, reject a Chinese national identity. Post-handover identification has continuously shifted away from a sense of “Chineseness” and towards a stronger sense of cultural and civic attachment to Hong Kong (Chow et al., 2020; Steinhardt et al., 2018). Identification with the term “Chinese” (中國人, *Zunggwokyahn*) has overall been in decline (CCPOS, 2017), and it is evident from several surveys that support for political independence grew in the wake of the 2019 protests (CCPOS, 2020; Tam and Jim, 2020). It is important, however, to bear in mind that the sharp decline in “Chinese” identification has much to do with the negative political connotations of being a PRC citizen; association with “Chineseness” in the sense of being ethnically Chinese has waxed and waned over the years, with events such as the 2008 Beijing Olympics proving a highpoint of positive cultural identification (Lau et al., 2012).

Considering the different strands of localism that emerged from the consecutive waves of cultural identification, along with the contradictory positions that the PRC and Hong Kong governments take on issues such as nation, ethnicity, race, and citizenship, it should be no surprise that the discourses that emerge in dialogue with these different positions are likewise deeply conflicted. Localist discourses to some extent suffer from similar paradoxes as the government’s attempts to define “Hong Kong-ness.” As it turns out, Hong Kong localism lays claim to much of the same cultural heritage as mainland-Chinese nationalism, but now flexibly reworked in the service of a Hong Kong community, or what Smith (1993: 21) called an “ethnic,” that is: a community characterized by

1. A collective proper name, 2. a myth of common ancestry, 3. shared historical memories, 4. one or more differentiating elements of common culture, 5. an association with a specific “homeland,” [and] 6. a sense of solidarity for significant sectors of the population.

In many ways, the discussions over Hong Kong’s identity resemble those in which early founding figures of the “New China” were engaged during the late nineteenth century as they tried to establish a Chinese national identity; in Hong Kong, many now pose similar questions about their homeland, often contrasting Hong Kong with China in their efforts to create and consolidate an autonomous imagined community of their own. This is apparent in the art of the Hong Kong protest movement, which illustrates artists’ tacit understanding of the nation, of shifting identities in the city, and of the relationship between Hong Kong’s citizens and their nationalisms.

Case Study: Networked Agitprop in Hong Kong’s 2019 Anti-Extradition Movement

The 2019 protests were a watershed moment for the creative, networked activities in the city (see also Ku, 2020), and this was visible in agitprop. In this, the movement built on previous protests, especially the 2014 umbrella movement, which had likewise used visual art and performance to transport political messages. The yellow umbrella, sticky notes, communal study and art sessions, protest songs, origami paper cranes, and lunchtime protests were all extensions of Hong Kong’s rich history of activist activities.

In what follows, we will present core themes and recurring patterns that our analysis identified specifically in protest art, and we will show that the movement’s agitprop constructed Hong-Kongness through recourse to nationalism. This is not to say that all of these cultural expressions homogenously collapsed into nationalist discourse. Much like the protest movement itself remained divided over issues such as the appropriate methods of protest (violent vs. non-violent) or the degree of autonomy that should be achieved (independence vs. maintaining the “one country two systems” principle), so too did the diverse artists who contributed to the movement’s cultural tapestry bring their own agendas and interpretations to bear. Take the examples in Figure 3.

In each of the images, the artists reference real-world events that had circulated as iconic photographs through communication networks, shaping the collective understanding of the protest movement. On the left, an unknown artist uses a pop-art comic style to render a famous protest scene in which a large mass of protesters made way for an ambulance. The act, and by extension the artwork, is a symbol of peaceful protest, and its cute art style and selection of slogans aim to activate a sense of solidarity. On the right, artist Tse Sai Pei reimagines a scene at New Town Plaza shopping mall in Shatin, where shoppers fled a violent altercation between protesters and the police. The image of a woman in a red dress, trying to escape in high heels while carrying her valuables, dips into complex associations with Hong Kong’s consumerist society and its stark rich–poor divides. While the original photograph by a United Social Press journalist does not show any violence, the comic version adds caricatures of police beating up protesters, connecting the



Figure 3. Protest art beyond nationalist themes: iconographies of solidarity (left; Chase, 2019) and class struggle (right; Tse, 2019).

scene with the implied backdrop of this event and further heightening the scene's absurdity.

While both examples create strong emotional appeals, neither relies explicitly on nationalism to do so. The ambulance scene can be viewed as an example of a peaceful community, and the police violence lends itself to angry reactions about the authorities, and possibly about the city's capitalist underpinnings. Granted, the woman in red evokes "China," and it will not have been lost on many viewers how high-end shoppers are frequently rich visitors from mainland China, passing through only to buy global luxury goods without appreciation for Hong Kong's local culture (Ip, 2015). That said, these associations are veiled, and they are not brought into dialogue with issues of political autonomy.

In this, these examples prove exceptions to wider patterns of meaning-making that are evident in the protest art. Specifically, we identified three recurring practices in the movement's agitprop: (1) use of local referents, (2) use of transnational cultural tropes, and (3) visual and textual framing that evokes nations and nationalism through transnational tropes. Together, these practices constitute a set of strategic moves that invite emotional responses in the service of an imagined community of independent, autonomous Hong Kongers.

Use of Local Referents: Idioms and Hong Kong Identity

Much of the protest art we analysed speaks to the idea of a Hong Konger identity. To many in the city, it remains uncertain what exactly constitutes a Hong Konger.

To quote one business owner (Anonymous 4, 2021): “What we really need is time to think about what Hong Kong is.” This ambiguity was by no means a weakness, as it allowed activists and artists to envision Hong Kong as a place that its residents needed to reinvent. This became clear during fieldwork in early 2021. As Chinese New Year approached, one of us went shopping for classic red gift envelopes, and he came across “conscientious” envelopes sold at a “yellow shop” (黃店, *wongdim*), a pro-democracy store that had aligned itself with the movement, both in sentiment and through financial contributions. The red envelopes that this specific shop sold (Figure 4) featured a drawing of the Hong Kong skyline and the famous Lion Rock, which was draped in a yellow banner. The design studio in a short interview explained that they envisioned the future of Hong Kong as a blank slate for Hong Kong’s people to fill with meaning.



Figure 4. Themed Chinese New Year’s envelope “Conscientious Guardian,” with Hong Kong Island in the foreground and the Lion Rock in the background.

Source: Image: author, 2020.

Much like the designers of the red packet in Figure 4, the creators of the movement's agitprop leaned into the creative flexibility that the ostensibly blank canvas of Hong Kong identity offered. Most of the communication practices side-step the thorny issue of how precisely to define Hong-Kongness, instead relying on emotional triggers and creative, recognizable phrases and slogans to evoke a shared commitment to Hong Kong as a community. An example of this is the artwork in Figure 5, which prominently declares "We are Hong Kongers, together we are one." Before its yellow-black background, it depicts protesters carrying iconic accessories and signs with familiar slogans. The image evokes solidarity between activists, implying that people from all walks of life are coming together, and arguably also extending this appeal to community sentiments through inclusive language ("we" and "together"). The poster effectively invites all Hong Kongers to join in the construction of a new society.

Such agitprop appeals to local parameters of identification, usually featuring inside jokes, memes, cultural icons, and references to local food. Figure 6 shows a collage of examples, each drawing on local Hong Kong iconography. The image on the left uses the design scheme of a famous local brand of bread called "life bread," which police derided as a sign of low-class taste, but which the movement consequently (re)appropriated. The banner reads "never forgive, never forget, and never give up" in Chinese



Figure 5. Constructing "Hong Kongers".

Source: Image collected from the Internet Archive (IA, 2019).



Figure 6. Appeals to Hong-Kongness.

Source: Images collected from Telegram and HKFP (2020b).

and English. In this way, the brand becomes something local, turning this hallmark of the working-class experience into a quintessential food for the Hong Kong people.

The centre image uses a Lennon Wall as its backdrop, a symbol of participation: throughout the protests, it became customary to leave readily available markers and sticky notes, enabling anyone to add their own message. The superimposed Chinese writing asks, “if you give up, who will protect our city?” and it goes on to state: “keep it up Hong Kongers, resist and avenge.” It is left unsaid what exactly should not be forgotten or what needs to be avenged. Viewers are instead invited to draw on their own experiences of the past few years to fill in the blanks.

The image on the right references the umbrella movement. At its centre, on a field of flowers, stands a figure holding an iconic yellow umbrella. The flower might refer to the Bauhinia, the flower emblem for Hong Kong. On its right, the figure is propped up or cheered on by a cluster of hands, implying public support; on its left, it is flanked by a calendar with famous protest dates, indicating a shared past while appealing to tacit knowledge among viewers about the movement and its progression. The figure is further surrounded by local icons such as milk tea and safety gear, marking them as both a local and a protester. The slogan reads “liberate Hong Kong, revolution of our times,” adding that Hong Kongers should “walk together.” The artwork thus juxtaposes signs from different social contexts, implying that a protest identity and an identity as Hong Konger are two sides of the same coin.

Common rhetorical strategies elsewhere are to ask direct questions such as “would you not fight for your city,” state categorically that “a real Hong Konger would never forget,” or criticise perceived communal deficiency (e.g. “why do we choose to ignore injustice?” or “why do we choose to do nothing?”). It is also representative of what makes agitprop “networked”: the artworks are designed to agitate those on the sidelines of political activity, whether through emotional appeals, evocative imagery, or polemic reasoning, but they are also meant to foster a sense of community among members of the movement who might otherwise remain atomised. By establishing and circulating easily recognisable political symbols and turning them into a shared resource of political meaning-

making, agitprop does not just network ideas, it also networks people, weaving them into a community.

Intriguingly, such localist networking often draws on transnational references, making the movement's concerns legible to a wider audience. While this opens creative spaces for political imagination, as we will see below, it also creates further contradictions between Hong Kong's status as a cosmopolitan city and its perceived uniqueness. As was readily apparent during ethnographic fieldwork and interviews, this frequently led to cognitive dissonances: localist supporters of the protest movement tended to promote both an inclusive idea of the "Hong Konger" that could accommodate anyone who shared Hong Kong's civic "core values," and an exclusive idea that "Hong Kong-ness" was defined by ancestry, birth, upbringing, and ultimately physical features such as having a "Hong Kong face," as one student put it (Anonymous 1, 2021).

At times, the distinction between these ideals becomes blurred. While many Hong Kong localists pride themselves on their cosmopolitanism, they often frame their identity as a birthright. One interviewee (Anonymous 2, 2020) noted that anyone could be a Hong Konger if they "blend in"; asked what this entailed, the interviewee stated that it required that they "speak the language and know the culture." They then added: "maybe it's a little bit racist." Others are less self-reflective about such contradictions. For example, one market stall salesperson, who was selling "100% pure Hong Konger" products, was aligning themselves with cosmopolitan discourses about democracy and freedom of speech; at the same time, they were unapologetic about their position that only those born and raised in Hong Kong could be considered Hong Kongers (Anonymous 3, 2021). This kind of "pure Hong Kong-ness" reproduces the discourses of race and ethnicity that the authorities promote, but it replaces their Chinese foundations with references to Hong Kong roots, all the while reframing it in cosmopolitan terms that transnational audiences could understand.

Reframing Transnational Cultural Tropes

The agitprop we analysed frequently juxtaposes local and transnational references, which gave creators the opportunity to promote their respective brand of politics while evoking the "coolness" of near-global popular culture. The artworks especially draw from and rework diverse iconic products such as classic artworks, Hollywood films, anime productions, video games, and even Soviet-era and Mao-era propaganda. Artists repurpose these visual resources and play with them to construct political messages. Hong Kong institutions such as the police are inserted into Japanese anime and manga, such as the popular *Mob Psycho 100*, where such creative repurposing creates an alternate "Cop Psycho 100," now featuring protesters in place of the protagonists and the police as the prime evil (Figure 7, left). Hong Kong and PRC authority figures are folded into the plots of global film franchises such as the Marvel movies, especially the *Avengers* instalment *Endgame* (Figure 7, right), in which superheroes (i.e. the protesters) must fight against a supervillain (variably Xi Jinping or Carrie Lam) to restore life in the galaxy. As one

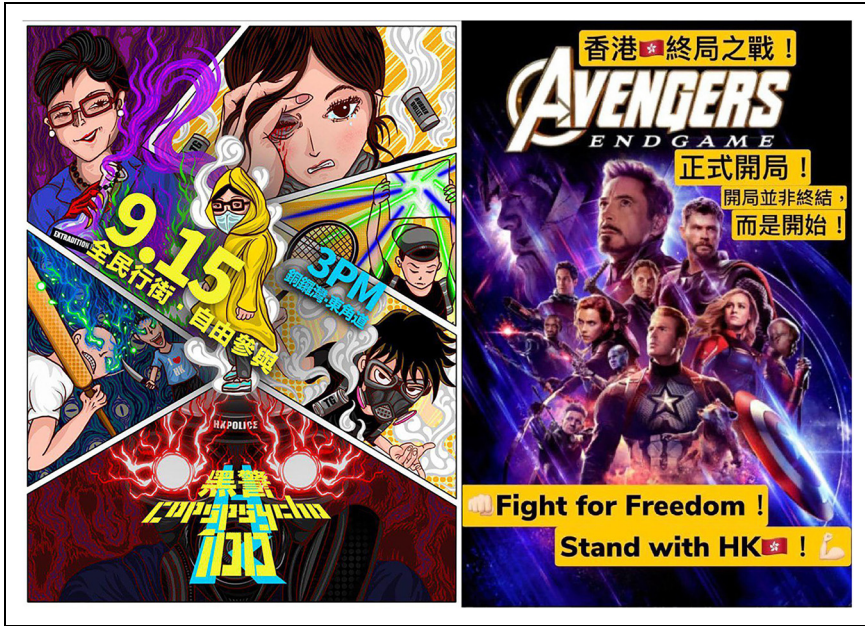


Figure 7. Transnational culture in Hong Kong's networked agitprop: Japanese anime (left) and Hollywood blockbuster (right).

Source: Images collected from IA (2019) and HKFP (2020b).

interviewee put it (Anonymous 6, 2021), citing this specific film, Hong Kong is “losing the battle with China” and has reached “the endgame.”

These discourses set up narratives of good versus evil, tapping into the protesters' sense of righteousness and binding them together as a team of heroic fighters. They create clear-cut enemies, vilifying the opponents of the movement. Take the examples in Figure 8, which draw from the imagery of Star Wars posters. Here, the Hong Kong protesters are the scrappy rebels fighting for freedom (right) while the CCP, the police, and the Hong Kong government represent the evil Galactic Empire and its quest for domination (left).

While China is not always explicitly referenced (e.g. Figure 8, bottom right), it looms in the background. It is the constant “other,” a dialogical foil against which much of the agitprop defines itself. In contrast, Hong Kongers are framed as being on the right side of history, fighting for freedom and democracy, and struggling against China, which stands for authoritarianism and fascism (also exemplified by the derogatory term “Chinazi”). This dichotomy creates a strong distinction between “us” and “them,” and it evokes a narrative of destiny, of the struggle for independence and autonomy against an oppressive force. Meanwhile, the recourse to these cultural repertoires makes the struggle appear fatalistic. There are only two outcomes to such dramatic Hollywood-style conflicts:

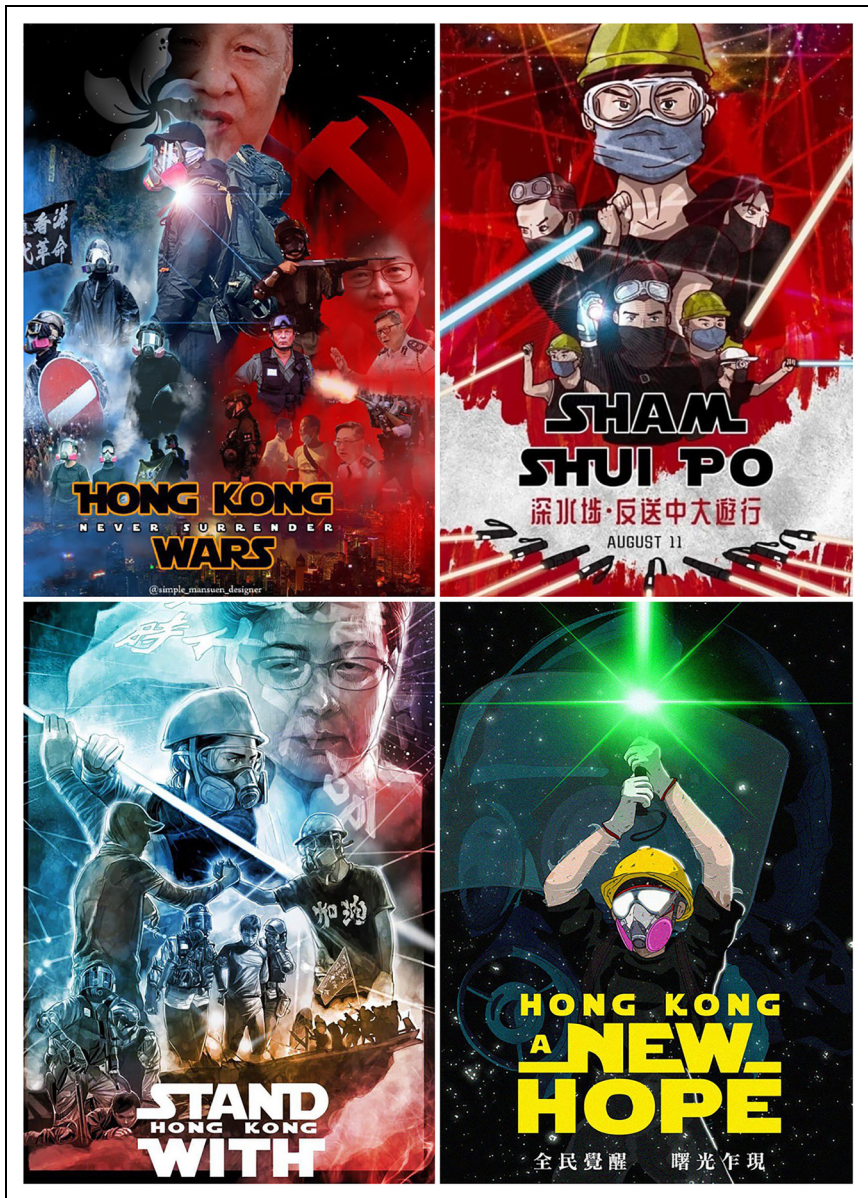


Figure 8. Star Wars and the revolution: out-group antagonisms (left) and in-group heroics (right).
Source: Images collected from HKFP (2020b).

victory or defeat. There can be no compromise with the “supervillain” or the “evil empire”.

Presumably, the target audience of such narratives is, on the one hand, Hong Kongers who have “walked the same road” (同路人, *Tungluyahn*) and for whom these works could be a source of solidarity. The use of non-Hong Kong imagery should then not be viewed as an indication that Hong Kong is lacking local history or culture that could be mobilized in support of the movement – we have seen above that networked agitprop can be full of local imagery. Instead, deploying and reframing transnational pop culture, especially superhero-themed movies, seems to resonate with local audiences who view themselves as both Hong Kongers and cosmopolitan internationals.

On the other hand, the transnational imagery also potentially speaks to sympathetic, like-minded people abroad, who are willing to spread the message through social media and potentially lend their support. This imagery is meant to travel, particularly to liberal democratic societies where the civic dimensions of Hong Kong’s localist project promise resonate. Referencing transnational popular culture is then also an important strategy for agitprop creators to integrate their nation-building efforts into transnational understandings of political struggle and revolution. By cleverly creating zero-sum narratives between opposing good-and-evil forces and using the visual language familiar to mass culture consumers the world over, the protest movement tries to make its struggles legible as the last resort of a righteous underdog.

Promoting Independence Through Local and Transnational Tropes

The protest movement’s agitprop creates a community category that is only very loosely defined but that can be filled with meaning through local references and a strong sense of outside oppression. A notable number of artworks take this logic of imagined community further, insisting on political autonomy or even independence. Figure 9 shows images that represent such Hong Kong nationalism. Two phrases stand out: “One Nation, One Hong Kong” (first image from the right) and “Hong Kong independence, the only way out” (香港獨立, 唯一出口, *Heunggong Duklap Waijat Ceothau*, first image from the



Figure 9. Map, landscape, and brand Hong Kong.

Source: Images collected from HKFP (2020b).

left). As these slogans suggest, independence here means having one's own separate nation, which in turn appears as the only way to maintain and preserve a collective cultural identity.

The second image from the right appropriates the logo of a local restaurant chain to promote independence. Many artworks use similar logic, showcasing the movement's ingenuity in using people's tacit knowledge of local brand familiarity and repurposing it in agitprop. The logo is made up of two characters representing togetherness (齊齊, *caicai*), with the words "Hong Kong Independence" printed underneath. These visuals estrange viewers from the familiar, leading to a shock of recognition. They show that, while politically radical, these artworks can be, and are, playful.

The second image from the left shows Lion Rock as a national landscape. The Lion Rock has been a favourite protest site due to its cultural status and dominating view over Hong Kong. It came to represent hard work and self-reliance in the decades after World War II, and its meaning was later rearticulated as standing for freedom and rule of law in post-handover Hong Kong (Mak, 2013). It forms part of the visual protest vocabulary since the 2014 umbrella movement, when activists draped a large yellow banner over the rock, demanding universal suffrage (Gruber, 2020). Lion Rock and its associated Lion Rock Spirit have been an important ideological framing device for Hong Kong values, epitomizing the blank slate that needs to be filled with national myth. As one interviewee (Anonymous 5, 2021) stated, Lion Rock itself had "no special meaning," but since the protests it had become a symbol (象徵, *zoengzing*) for Hong Kong, as people have now created organic memories of the Lion Rock as a favoured protest site.

Finally, the image on the far left shows the proposed national territory through a cartographic outline of Hong Kong. Importantly, the creators do not use a topographic depiction of territory, but a "map-as-logo," a "pure sign, no longer compass to the world," that promises to become the source of "an infinitely reproducible series, available for transfer to posters, official seals, letterheads, magazine and textbook covers, tablecloths, and hotel walls" (Anderson, 2006 [1983]: 175). Hong Kong is depicted as a discrete entity, reproducing the familiar iconographic logic of territorial representation, and consequently implying that what lies beyond its borders (i.e. mainland China) is "outside" Hong Kong.

This representation draws from and logically extends the CCP's own conceptualisation (and visualisation) of the special autonomous region, as well as the Hong Kong authorities' representation of the metropolitan territory. The subway maps found in every station show the city's transport lines reaching into the neighbouring mainland-Chinese city of Shenzhen, but that abstract territory is greyed out, marking it as a separate zone altogether. Weather reports similarly show Hong Kong as a separate category, with each of its districts harbouring different weather, akin to a nation's provinces. The agitprop imagery now infuses such common representational practices with a nationalist ambition to create the impression of an independent city-nation.

Importantly, the protest art does not in itself create nationalist frames – they have been available as cultural tropes for much longer, and they have often been inadvertently seeded or activated by official actors trying to appeal to a collective sense of “Chineseness.” This does not necessarily have to translate directly into activists and intellectuals demanding independence for a nation-state. For instance, prominent localist writer Chin Wan (陳雲) is a staunch believer of a Chinese cultural empire, in which Hong Kong would be an autonomous city-state (albeit somewhat indistinguishable from a nation-state (Chin, 2011)). Nevertheless, Hong Kong is “stuck” in nationalism. On the one hand, the PRC and Hong Kong governments embrace a vision of One China that does not merely conceptualise a unified territory, it also envisions a singular people of (mostly Han) Chinese ancestry who follow the CCP. This vision is steeped in nationalist myths and tropes that Chinese leaders are committed to following. At the same time, protesters in Hong Kong are equally stuck in nationalist frames, as is apparent from the frequent use of nationalist imagery. Much like the narratives featuring heroic superhero struggles, independence-driven agitprop visualises its agenda through recourse to a transnational iconography of national independence movements. Figure 10 reproduces such imagery, specifically a visual and rhetorical reference to the American Revolution (top right) that elsewhere also extends to an embrace of related symbols such as the Statue of Liberty and quotes by American founding fathers. Another frequent reference point is French nationalism. The top left and bottom images each adapt Eugène Delacroix’s influential painting *Liberty Leading the People*, creating a Hong-Kong-style version of the 1830 French Revolution, but now dressing the revolutionaries in typical contemporary protest gear and having “lady liberty” holding the black version of the Hong Kong flag that became a frequent protest symbol.

In their attempts to rework community ideas, agitprop designers frequently reproduced, reinforced, and ultimately naturalised nationalist frames as a seemingly common-sense way of understanding contemporary Hong Kong. As our own qualitative research on the ground revealed, many participants in the 2019 movement could only imagine Hong Kong as either a part of the Chinese nation, with varying degrees of autonomy, or as a fully independent Hong Kong nation. The visualisations we have shown reflect this understanding of nationalism, its historical origins, and its implications. Such understanding can, at times, slide into hyper-awareness. This is apparent from one of the founding documents of modern Hong Kong nationalism, the 2013 special journal issue from the Hong Kong University student union, titled “Discussion on Hong Kong Nationalism” (香港民族論, *Hoenggong Manzukleon*; Hong Kong University Students’ Union, 2014). The journal opens with a quote from French historian Ernest Renan’s influential 1882 article “What is a Nation?” The bulk of the introduction is about different theories of nationalism, prominently citing, for example, Anderson’s imagined community. The meta-awareness of nations and nationalism as arbitrary historical constructs does not dissuade the authors from proposing the idea of a Hong Kong nation. On the contrary, the authors argue that if all nations are arbitrary, and if all ethnicity is made up, then



Figure 10. Transnational iconographies of national independence.

Source: Images reproduced from IA (2019) and Balding (2019).

there is space for the construction of a Hong Kong people separate from mainland China. In this, they adopt similar logic as arguments about Hong Kong as a blank slate: both create opportunities for building the foundations of a new nation.

Conclusion

In this article, we showed how the nation is summoned through agitprop in the context of Hong Kong's 2019 anti-extradition bill movement. We examined protest art during a shock moment that travelled around the world and inspired many Hong Kongers to promote and serve "their" Hong Kong. To capture how such DIY propaganda art links people and ideas together in both physical and digital contexts, often at lightning speed, we proposed the concept of "networked agitprop." We used this concept to explain how images and ideas of the nation could spread easily and be used in different contexts, not only in Hong Kong but potentially everywhere with internet access. Through digital networks, it is easier than ever to make, share, and spread an image anonymously and to become part of a collective of agitprop makers. These images form part of a visual commons and draw on local and global references, recognised by their audience, who in turn can download and print them, post them on walls, share them on social media, and become inspired or outraged. As our exploration of such networked agitprop has shown, the images do more than merely create a collective protest identity. They conjure up the kind of "ethnie" that Smith (1993) identified as the foundation for nation-building. In this case, grassroots forces engage in networked dialogue to create a people and a homeland through cultural and everyday practices. The 2019 movement's networked agitprop makes these practices tangible as visual art. While this art is by no means homogeneous, certain patterns are discernible: it frequently assumes public support for its political programme; it draws on and reinforces shared historical memories; it evokes a common homeland by referencing local cultural touchstones; and it weaves these semiotic resources into a network of highly emotive cues that promise to inspire attachment to a Hong Kong identity that stands apart from other potential associations, for example, with China. To this end, the movement's agitprop built on the iconography and themes of previous protest movements, often extending them to what must have seemed a logical endpoint to the creators: arguments for an autonomous, independent nation of Hong Kong.

However, as much as the protest art evokes ideas of independence and rebellion, it frequently casts Hong Kong's status in dichotomous and essentialist terms: the nation becomes "the only way out," which ultimately "limits the imagination" to nation-based political solutions (Skey and Antonsich, 2017). Agitprop then risks falling into a trap, into a "box of the imagination" (Brown, 2017), though this does not have to be the inevitable outcome for this form of political communication (Jodice, 2022: 17). However, it may well be a heightened risk in networked agitprop. While more traditional agitprop can offer a great deal of freedom for creating programmatic, emotive arguments that challenge status quos, the networked nature of agitprop in digitally accelerated, large-scale movements such as those in Hong Kong creates strong temptations for artists to lean into the most widely available repertoires of cultural signs to create messages that appeal to the most common denominator among their networked audiences.

It is then arguably unfortunate that this common denominator must so frequently be the nation. In the long history of conceptualising community, there have been alternative models to the nation-state, ranging from anarchist to globalist, and recent interventions by Asian scholars have been particularly innovative in mobilising local political philosophies and

experiences to novel ends (e.g. Ling, 2019; Shih, 2022). Hong Kong's networked agitprop contains the potential for similarly innovative identity construction; it would be prudent to lean into the cosmopolitan foundations of this identity construction and to disentangle it from its association with ethnicity, lest it creates precisely the kind of nationalist rhetoric of which protesters accuse the mainland authorities.

It remains an open question how this can be achieved within the circuits of communicative power that shape capitalist network societies. In the case of Hong Kong, networked agitprop formed part of a protest canon that was filtered through the networks of Hong Kong's hyper-capitalist consumer economy. Posters, pins, telephone cases, flags, and similar easy-to-manufacture items displaying protest imagery became "yellow goods," circulating through the market. Commercial establishments that sympathise with the protest movement, the "yellow shops," functioned as agitation stations, reminding passers-by of the movement and its ideals. The drive to create packageable, consumable shorthand messages may be one of the reasons why so much of the movement's revolutionary art reproduced cultural tropes that imagined an autonomous community of Hong Kongers through nationalism, replete with its transnationally recognizable tropes and symbols.

Future research will need to explore whether such drift back into a limiting "box of imagination" also takes place in other movements that rely on digital networks and that sit atop production and distribution systems with capitalist market rationales. In an age of nation-states, it may generally be difficult to move beyond this frame of reference. In Hong Kong, some artists indeed attempted to do so, for instance by anchoring their efforts to visualize community in terms of civic values and inclusive attitudes. But such agitprop had to contend with works that aimed to establish a local, exclusive "ethnic." Radical on the surface, such artistic expressions often prove unable to imagine a political future beyond concepts such as nations and nation-states, leading them to inadvertently reproduce the wider systems of power they claim to be challenging. It is hard to assess empirically how such discourses are evolving, now that the government has effectively driven them underground through its repressive politics. However, visions of independence are bound to remain alive among former protesters and activists, localist business owners and lawyers, and academics and artists. If Hong Kong's history of protest and civic contention is any indication, then the nationalist edge of these visions is only going to sharpen in the face of further repression, threatening to burst onto the scene during future flashpoints of crisis. Those moments may not be as manageable as the central authorities in Beijing believe.

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