

Under the Umbrella

Umbrella sociology

Alistair Fraser

IN ENGLISH, THE NOUN UMBRELLA comes from the Latin *umbella*, meaning flat-topped flower, and from *umbra*, meaning shade: a flower that protects. In written Chinese, however, the character used for umbrella is not a noun, but a verb, 'to block' (遮, *ze*). While these roots share a common idea – of defence and safety – they also allude to divergent meanings. One is static and organic, the other mobile and proactive. Both represent something important about the protests.

While some – particularly international – reports have depicted the Umbrella Movement as being relatively homogenous and cohesive, the protests have in fact been extremely heterogenous. As the contributions to this issue demonstrate, participants have been focused on action rather than reaction; on individual acts of resistance rather than a unifying narrative. Indeed, Cantonese-speaking friends tell me that few people actually used the terms 'umbrella' or 'movement' in everyday discussions. Conversations are more grounded in action: 'Did you occupy Admiralty?' 'Did you sit-in?' This gap between representation and reality shows the value of sociology in making sense of unfolding social and political events.

In 1959, the sociologist C Wright Mills published a now-famous book called *The Sociological Imagination*. In it, Mills outlines a way of thinking that links the micro-level of everyday life with the macro-level of structural change, between what he calls 'private troubles' and 'public issues'. By shuttling back and forth between these levels, Mills thought it possible to relate large-scale political and economic shifts to personal decision-making. Cultivating this approach means not only an ability to analyse the emergent aspects of social life – of history 'in-the-making' – but also in grasping the significance of individual action in altering its path. In demonstrating the contingent nature of life, Mills thought that sociology could promote social activism.

Fifty-five years later, this way of thinking remains an indispensable tool in understanding current social change and, importantly, one not reserved solely for academics. In many ways the Umbrella Movement involved the rapid development of a kind of mass sociological imagination, in which a direct connection between individual choice and structural change became obvious for a sizable population. The private troubles of individuals, families and communities became fused with the public issue of political representation, and it became clear that action was possible.

As the student contributions to this issue show, the forms of involvement varied tremendously – from steadfast occupiers to online translators, quiet contributors to logistical coordinators – but were nonetheless unified under the banner of collective action. In this sense, the English roots of *umbella* and *umbra* feel particularly apt – these actions represent the flowering of an organic form of grassroots politics that is both powerful and protective. This unifying umbrella brought together people from varying backgrounds and political stripes, and created space for a range of minority groups to have a voice.

Indeed, what has often been missed is that this particular social movement has been a particularly *social* movement. Though most came to the protest sites for the politics, many stayed for the community. In a city so keenly focused on individual success, where living spaces are so incredibly cramped, the occupy sites were a revelation. Collectively, participants redefined the space – from a spaghetti-junction choked with taxis, buses and fumes to a spontaneous space of quiet defiance and interdependent conviction. The expansive spaces of the protests sites also proved to be fertile soil for the growth of creativity, as art and resistance came together in the form of sculpture, banners, and DIY post-its.

As some of the other contributions here illustrate, however, peering beneath this umbrella reveals a complex range of social divisions: the creation of community is both inclusive and exclusive. During the height of the protests, suddenly you were in or out, for or against, yellow or blue. In this sense, the Chinese verb for umbrella, 'to block', helps to clarify more than the English. The protests were mobile, active, defiant – in turn, tensions based on gender and social class became exposed, social boundaries were solidified, rumour and conspiracy flourished. What this shows is that, among other things, social movements must be understood not just at a broad level of abstraction, but at the level of the individual; they are social, human struggles above all.

And this, to me, speaks of why we need sociology. Making sense of major world events through their impact on daily life; shuttling between history, biography and culture; seeking out the cracks between representation and reality. This is the stuff of the sociological imagination. C Wright Mills would, I'm sure, have approved of the Umbrella Movement, as a powerful demonstration of both the 'task' and the 'promise' of sociology that he spoke of so passionately. More than asking what sociology can do for the Umbrella Movement, though, we might ask what the Umbrella Movement can do for sociology. We might, for instance, think of a form of 'umbrella sociology' that is both protective yet engaged, unifying yet mobile, civic yet creative. Now that's an umbrella I'd like to get under.

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Acknowledgements:
Maggy Lee, Sophia So,
Denise Tse-Shang
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Understanding the Umbrella Movement from the perspective of governance in post-1997 Hong Kong

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SINCE THE HANDOVER OF SOVEREIGNTY IN 1997, social conflict and popular mobilization have been challenging the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) Government. This culminated in the Umbrella Movement: beneath the calls for universal suffrage lie people's grievances about the government's incapability in alleviating socioeconomic inequalities and the attendant problems. I will argue that such incompetence is rooted in the 'built-in' weaknesses of Hong Kong's political structure.

Problem on the surface: inequalities in the global city

Since the 1990s, Hong Kong has developed into what Saskia Sassen calls a global city that witnesses a polarizing occupational structure and widening income inequality, the manifestations of which are multi-faceted. For instance, housing becomes increasingly unaffordable for the average household; hence the ever-lengthening waiting list for public housing, and the 'popularity' of sub-divided units, i.e., partitioned rooms in flats often located in poorly maintained old residential buildings, as an option of accommodation. This is not helped by skyrocketing property prices, but the government's commitment to restructuring the housing market and land supply, which is vital for curbing speculative activities, is also conspicuously absent. The dismay of the public is visualized in the Umbrella Movement: protesters label their tents with the names of luxury residences, so as to mock the government's failure to provide people shelter.

Housing policy exemplifies the government's departure from a redistributive agenda. With the ascendancy of the neoliberal doctrine in public policy-making since the late colonial era, emphasis has been placed on minimizing public expenditure, purportedly geared towards making public administration more efficient and raising the competitiveness of the local economy in the global market. This explains the gradual withdrawal of the role of the government from housing provision, and in relation to this urban planning, as in the case of the provision of education and medicine. The government thus becomes less and less accountable to the needs and interests of the public, as evidenced in increasing housing unaffordability.

Structural weakness of governance: a look at the legislature

Bucking the trend of neoliberalism is not easy in a globalizing economy and will not singularly help salvage the government's dwindling accountability to the public. Conservative budget practices, an executive-led government and elitist rule were hallmarks of Hong Kong's colonial rule and were considered essential to the maintenance of the city's capitalist way of life after the handover in 1997. Written into, and guaranteed in, the Basic Law is therefore the skewed power distribution in favour of pro-business, pro-Beijing functional interests in the political institutional set-up. According to the Basic Law, the Legislative Council (Legco) should be made up of an identical number of seats returned from the directly-elected geographic constituencies

Above:
A protester named his/her tent 'Umbrella Residence' in the Admiralty occupy area, mocking the way the government turns a blind eye to a property market increasingly skewed towards the building of expensive residences by private developers, at the expense of the housing needs of the masses. Image courtesy of Benson Tsang.