

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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Understanding the Umbrella Movement from the perspective of governance in post-1997 Hong Kong

Kwok Wing-hei, Richard

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.

(GCs) and those returned from the functional constituencies (FCs). The seats of the latter, professedly representative of the interests of the functional elites and distributed across 28 sectors (e.g., industrial and professional sectors), are, according to voter registration statistics, elected by an electorate 15 times smaller than that of the GCs. Despite this, the FCs hold equal power to the GCs in passing and blocking bills or motions under the separate voting system, where a passed motion or amendment should be supported by a simple majority of each of the GCs and FCs. In other words, the legislature is designed in such a way that diminishes the power of the GCs, where most democrats and pro-grassroots representatives are elected into. Their proposed bills and motions (e.g., legislation on the right to collective bargaining) can easily be vetoed by the FCs, which comprise mostly business and pro-establishment figures. In this sense, the legislature virtually guarantees the power of the FCs to authorize policies in favour of the interests of establishment and the business community, i.e., those that incur minimum expenditure on public services (hence minimizing the pressure for increased taxation) and facilitate maximum private capital accumulation. Such power imbalance underlies the continued struggle of the public for, say, the universal retirement protection system (which entails long-term commitment to public expenditure), and the approval of the construction of the HK\$70 billion Guangzhou-Shenzhen-Hong Kong Express Rail Link in 2010, despite mass discontent.

The Basic Law: the writing on the wall

One should be reminded that the Basic Law was drafted by a committee dominated by PRC government officials, who, alongside the appointed local representatives, reported to the National People's Congress (NPC). This means the NPC was guaranteed the control of the institutional design of governance in post-1997 Hong Kong. From the NPC's point of view, the much-versed 'prosperity and stability' of Hong Kong's financial capitalism is pivotal for Chinese capital flow and accumulation in the global market, and, by extension, for PRC's continued economic growth, upon which the legitimacy of the Communist regime is founded ever since PRC opened its economy to the world in 1978. This explains the skewed power distribution in favour of pro-business, pro-Beijing functional interests in the SAR's political institutional set-up. With this in mind, one can understand why popular demand for further democratization, which entails the dismantlement of the FCs, has been strongly opposed by the business community since the late colonial period. One can also understand why, despite 'One Country, Two Systems' as envisioned in the Basic law, Beijing has unabashedly intervened in local politics, for example, through the 'reinterpretation' of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (SCNPC) of the Basic Law and the subsequent veto against universal suffrage in 2007 (for the Chief Executive (CE)) and 2008 (for the Legco).

The bone of contention in the Umbrella Movement, the proposed election method of the CE in 2017, was decided by the aforementioned SCNPC on 31 August 2014. It is stipulated that a 1200-member, allegedly 'broadly representative' selection committee represented by members of 4 sectors (comprising local representatives of the NPC and the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (NCCPPCC), as well as local functional elites) will be formed. For candidates to be nominated, they have to secure the support of half of the committee members. This 'universal suffrage' is controversial, as the above means that the nominees will be 'pre-screened' by a committee mostly composed of pro-Beijing and pro-business figures. The CE elected will therefore likely to be strongly in favour of Beijing's and business interests, and the current power imbalance in the SAR's governance, and its eroded accountability to the public, will be continued. The Umbrella Movement broke out in the midst of public concern about such injustice, in the absence of any sign of resistance by the SAR government against the 31 August decision.

Conclusion

The Umbrella Movement represents another milestone in Hong Kong's struggle for democratization. The underlying reasons are complicated and intricate. I have shown that income inequality, and the ensuing 'new poverty' in Leo Goodstadt's words, is not merely aggravated by globalization, or inevitable in capitalist societies, as the first and second CEs respectively would have us believe. It is a case of ineffective governance built into the political institutional structure of the SAR. The grassroots and the socially-underprivileged, with their strong presence in mass mobilization in recent years, are primed for political reform. The government, with its 'wait-and-see' attitude, is misguided in promulgating a view that 'livelihood issues' should be set apart from politics in the course of the Movement. Such a view can only encourage quick-fix solutions to social problems and social conflict, deters the making of transformative policy, and further erodes its accountability to the public. This, I believe, will bring about more political impasses and challenges from the civil society in the close future.

Youth participation in the Umbrella Movement: the role of new media

Compiled by Carmen Tong

OCCUPIERS AND ORDINARY PEOPLE ALIKE, Hongkongers found themselves glued to different new media since teargas swept the streets of Admiralty. News and updates diffused quickly beyond the territory through multilingual updates on Facebook. Working with almost 800 translators, I witnessed the eagerness of netizens' engagement in the Umbrella Movement.

Notwithstanding the reservations of its critics, new media plays a crucial role in the mobilization of social movements across the world. Indeed, for the younger generation in Hong Kong, new media is the platform through which they exchange information and perspectives, engage in dialogues, make their voices heard, coordinate resource mobilization, hence exercise their rights and empower themselves as citizens. New media is indispensable as a public sphere for them, as the following 4 narratives testify.

Wing-sum Leung

Like many, I was only an 'information receiver' at the beginning of the movement. Not until the birth of a particular Facebook page did I experience the genuine power of technology. Different Facebook pages appeared simultaneously when protesters began occupying the streets. First-hand and timely updates, as well as information about locations of resource stations and strategies of student organizations, etc., became available online. The overflow of news and rumours caught the attention of some students in journalism, who then set up a new page to offer information verification. This page soon attracted thousands of followers and made its impact by rectifying the inaccuracies spotted on other Facebook Pages. This was a ground-breaking idea for me.

Hoping to enhance communications between students, I came up with the idea of building a platform for students to share and discuss our thoughts on the movement and political reform in Hong Kong. Instead of sleeping on the streets, my friends and I began channelling our energy into talking and reading. We extracted key arguments from the literature and interviews with scholars, and presented them on our own page. We also conducted our own interviews with other university students. The aim was to generate dialogue about how long-term measures can be implemented for citizens to achieve genuine universal suffrage.

Our Facebook page has transformed my experience in the movement; from a mere observer on the streets to an active participant focusing on social deliberation and lobbying. I believe my experience is not unique. Social media helps democratize the movement and elevates citizens' participation both quantitatively and qualitatively, in a manner possibly no other medium can match.

Alan Yau

The ignition of the first teargas bomb was not only witnessed in Admiralty, but also broadcast live on the internet. As diffusive as the gas, discussions about the police's action permeated into virtually all social networking sites and chat groups, constantly notifying and reminding me about the surreal development in those days. There was no escape from the sense of urgency and emotion that drives the most inert person into action, in real or virtual reality.

Largely a 'keyboard fighter' behind the screen in the events, I joined one of my classmates, who witnessed teargas bombs unremorsefully tossed into a first-aid station, in forming a group dedicated to making first-aid packs for medical stations. With students and staff working together, resources were quickly gathered, and the first-aid packs were ready within 24 hours. Everybody found their niche in helping; social boundaries were no longer in effect in the light of a greater cause. People joined different groups when needed, and they parted ways when the group had served its best.

Instant, bottom-up coordination, as exemplified by the work of our group, is hardly a rarity. To maximize the use of

resources between occupy locations, a centralized online spreadsheet was developed and circulated among netizens.¹ Users remained anonymous to each other, yet worked together to optimize resource distribution. Although the movement has ended for now, efforts and the handiworks of Hong Kong citizens will forever be stored as zeros and ones on the internet, reminiscent of our glory.

Min-zhuo Zhou

The hubbub of the Umbrella Movement has gradually died down. While I was not a protester at the frontline, I still feel involved for what I did in transmitting the happenings of the movement via social media to family and friends in mainland China. In mainland China, official media did not report the movement and social media was placed under surveillance. When you typed 'Umbrella Movement' in Baidu, China's most popular search engine, you would be reminded that, "according to laws and regulations 'none' results can be found". This means all information has been filtered. Despite the government's great efforts in blocking information, people in mainland China were not completely in the dark. Weibo, the Chinese Twitter, is the most fascinating platform – because of its most tactful users. You need to play with words, for example using allusion or puns, when conveying sensitive issues.

Amid rumours of a clearing-off before the Chinese National Day, I voiced on Weibo my disappointment with some mainland students' apathy and my concerns for those on the streets, in a euphemistic way without mentioning "Hong Kong" or "Umbrella Movement". This triggered my friends' curiosity, even though not everyone was sympathetic. Afterwards, I elaborated my concerns using 'Moments' in Wechat, the Whatsapp counterpart, thus bypassing censorship on Weibo. When I reposted pictures and articles from Facebook onto my 'Moments', they generated constructive responses, and I felt my efforts in bringing the truth and concern for Hong Kong to people in mainland China had not been in vain.

Hok-yeet Siu

"I would like to do a documentary. Can I videotape your dream about your future and about Hong Kong?"

This was my opening question to all the interviewees in the documentary I made. During the Umbrella Movement, young people were constantly criticised, mainly by their elders, for being idealistic and selfish. Idealistic, because their demands for universal suffrage are unlikely to ever materialise, and are certainly doubtful within the parameters stipulated by Beijing. Selfish, because their actions (e.g., road blocks) inconvenienced many others, and in all likelihood caused their parents to worry. Many critics furthermore argued that the young will eventually, when they grow up, abandon their 'superficial post-materialist' values (unrealistic ideals, detached from material reality). I found such cynicism repulsive, but couldn't help wondering what if such prophecies come true? I started to record young people's ideas in their own voice for my documentary project. I discovered that, beneath the slogan "I want genuine election", different protesters harbour different agendas about working towards a better Hong Kong.

One protester would like to run a quality bakery with reasonable prices for ordinary people; some would like to become teachers who nurture civic-minded pupils; and others would like to be professional journalists who work for the public. It was most interesting to learn that some protesters had never listened to their partners' dreams! I was especially touched by two junior college boys who were preparing for their school test under the streetlights. They chose not to go to the study area which had proper chairs and desks, because they felt that the students taking public examinations were more in need. Despite their different backgrounds, these young people were all trying to strive for the public good.

People say Hong Kong is dying, but the aspirations of young people are sparks in a seemingly hopeless situation. I still believe as long as we work out our individual dreams, a better Hong Kong will come true. My documentary is to preserve the present, so that neither our wishes nor our longing for democracy can be eroded by time.

Reference

1 <http://tinyurl.com/centralspreadsheet>

Below:

From the provision of supplies to the treatment of injuries sustained by pepper spray, information was shared and exchanged online in the Umbrella Movement.

25	Question	solved	pepper spray treatment 胡椒噴霧處理	Use salt water to wash off, milk to soothe/rinse burning 用鹽水清洗，牛奶舒緩/沖洗	1:1的比例 (「糊工」和「Johnson's Baby」等)，相較水、生理鹽水、牛奶更為有效，特別是牛奶，陽光曝曬加上缺乏冷卻設施下，容易變壞。 http://lj.mp/oc-pepper1 http://lj.mp/oc-pepper2 http://i.imgur.com/fDiHeq9.png
34	Question	solved	有台灣朋友準備支援物資。香港是否真的需要外地支援？	本港物資仍然充足	可否幫忙預備耳塞、眼罩及N95口罩 http://3mshop.kingnet.com.tw/3m-products-innovation.html?pcid=51
35	Question		im IT student what areas can I help in building system?		
36	Question		What is the channel of walkie talkie? I am Rabbit. I brought 20 walk talkies yesterday and the day before but cant find the channel		
37	Questions	solved	confirm香港goggles & N95已經out of stock? 有冇人可以provide 個人防護設備 (PPE) ge supplier contact? 佢地應該有讓目鏡、防護(呼吸)裝備等	少量商舖仍有供應	
38	Questions	solved	有冇人可以整理 "(5)相關支援點"	已有人處理中	