

## Under the Umbrella *continued*

### “This is my choice, the right choice!” Police solidarity and power: some observations of police usage of social media

Leona Li & Josephine Sham

IN A WAY, the new media mobilizes and democratizes political participation. What we know less is how the new media also mobilizes participation in a counter-movement that defends police use of force and violence against the protesters in the sites of occupation. Some people speculated that police officers were ‘indoctrinated’, of which we had limited source of information for further investigation. However, thanks to our connections with the police force, we observed how, during the Umbrella Movement, junior police officers closely connected with one another via police forums and Facebook became bound together into a cohesive unit exuding solidarity. In the process, they shared articles arguing for the use of force and other related actions against the protesters.

On 5 October 2014, many of Leona’s police friends posted onto Facebook their photos in which they wore blue, captioned with statements such as, ‘We wear blue, so what? This is my choice, the right choice!’ Against the yellow colour adopted by the protesters, blue symbolizes opposition against the Movement, and, in turn, support for or defence of police use of force against the protesters. Nevertheless, aside from the unquestioned trust placed in police’s ‘professionalism’, Leona rarely saw grounds for such assertions provided. Posts like this drew many ‘like’ responses from fellow officers, but many respondents were actually not working at the frontline and knew little of what was really happening.

What is more disturbing is that Leona received a Facebook private message from a police acquaintance expressing his torn feelings. He disagreed with some police practices against the protesters, yet sympathized with frontline colleagues working for long hours. Such feelings were never publicly disclosed on Facebook. This begs the question: how many have been struggling to have their voices heard, beneath the façade of police solidarity that obscures differences?

Police solidarity was shored up by a siege mentality against not only accusations of their excessive use of force, but also provocative anti-police criticisms. Frontline officers,



Primed for action – but to what extent could individual police officers act upon their will? Image courtesy of Kwok Wing-hei, Richard.

overworked and stressed, felt indignant. “We are human. Why can’t we voice our anger?”. Josephine became deeply troubled by the police’s problematic use of the social media. For example, a piece of news on Facebook about the assault against Hong Kong journalist Erik Mak, who was trying to capture an instance of scuffles in the Mongkok protest area, was shared by a police friend of hers. It was described with the statement, “Cool, feeling happy today”. Seeing the many ‘likes’ drawn to this post, Josephine, after prolonged discussion with this friend, eventually ‘unfriended’ the latter. Personal and political relationships have been brought into tension across the city, causing some to become concerned about an erosion of police ethics and officers’ dissipating sense of responsibility and concern for social injustice.

By collectively changing their Facebook profile pictures into ones with blue ribbons, in the same way the protesters /movement sympathizers did with yellow ribbons in the

aftermath of the teargas bombing on 28 September 2014, the police officers made a political statement. How such infringement of the Police Force Ordinance, which mandates political neutrality of the police, actually won the consent of the officers’ supervisors is disquieting. The same can be said of the police’s claim for their entitlements to freedom of speech – as the protesters and their sympathizers did – at the expense of their professionalism. What seemed forgotten is that, unlike average citizens, the police is equipped with the power to exercise the highest level of violence as long as it is in the name of ‘maintaining social order’. Forfeiting political neutrality encourages the abuse of power of the political authority, thus putting more citizens at risk of the routinized use of excessive force by the police.

\*Quotes were translated from Chinese to English and were modified for the sake of anonymity.

## The Opinion



Do they belong? Women’s presence in the masculinized ‘public’, as in the protests in Mongkok, was constantly policed, which delimited their exercise of agency as a citizen. Image courtesy of Tiong Leung.

### The voices unheard: gender politics and LGBT activism in the Umbrella Movement

Liona Li, Candice Tang and Clara Tang

THE UMBRELLA MOVEMENT comes as an awakening to the unlimited possibilities of enacting political citizenship in Hong Kong. Nonetheless, few are aware of the gender politics and the activism of the LGBT community embedded in the movement. Women and the LGBT community are entitled to freedom of speech under the protection of the Bill of Rights Ordinance and the Basic Law, but are their voices heard and recognized in the movement?

#### Women in the movement

Clara was at the frontline in Mongkok when a mob first violently confronted and attacked the protesters on 3 October 2014. Amid the yelling, swearing and pushing, a sharp male voice cutting through the air was heard screaming, “Protect the girls!”. The girls who were too busy guarding the frontline were all of a sudden surrounded by a chain of men. Notwithstanding the good-will of these men, it is clear that they were acting on the assumption that women are weak and need protection. Gender assumptions are also validated and reinforced by the media. A picture posted by the press, captioned “a girl frightened crying”, showed Clara crying. Clara was shocked to see her tears of extreme anger twisted into a symbol of fragility. She is not alone; the press is especially interested in showing women treated violently, such as those being tossed onto the ground or sexually harassed or assaulted by the police or passersby, most of them anti-Umbrella Movement protesters. Throughout the movement, we seldom find images of women fighting against violence, or hear women interviewed about their frontline experiences.