

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.

Gender-biased and selective media representation is ever-present, and this is not helped by the construction of sites of protests as dangerous, hence 'masculine'. With frequent eruptions of violent confrontations since 3 October, Mongkok has become a site 'for man': "One is not a real man unless he has guarded Mongkok". Clara was often approached by male protesters in Mongkok for friendly conversations, but also for asking why she was there as a girl. She was frequently urged to go home, or to Admiralty, the other site located in a district of government offices, hotels and business. It was occupied by many university students and frequented by office ladies, thus perceivably 'safer' for women.

Women's existence in the movement has been categorized as one of passivity, vulnerability and victimhood. Clara's experience, alongside the sexual and verbal abuses directed at female protesters by both police and public, testify to how women's freedom to exercise their bodies and strength in the movement is constantly policed. The gendering of sites of protests attests to the entrenched divide between the masculinity-coded 'public' sphere, i.e., economy and politics, and the 'private' sphere, i.e., family, housework and childcare, which seemingly continues to be where women 'belong'. How unpaid 'private' labour limits the inclusion of many other women in the realm of the 'public', remains hidden from the purview of the public and many protesters.

The presence of the LGBT community

Since the de-criminalization of (male) homosexuality in 1991, the local LGBT community has been struggling for recognition of their identities and relationships. They have fought for legislation against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation (2005/12), and for transgender people's right to marry (2009/12), etc. Nevertheless, they are still excluded from certain social rights (e.g., couples' eligibility for joint tax return or to apply for public housing). This is because citizenship in Hong Kong, as in Western liberal democracies, continues to rest on a (masculine – see discussion in the previous section) conception of a heterosexual individual, whose participation in the 'public' domain is supposed to be supported by the reproductive labour carried out in the 'private' realm of marriage and family: the institutionalized expression of heterosexuality. Despite the calls for 'care' if not 'tolerance' for sexual minorities, these belie the disgust and hatred directed against their alleged 'threat' to the 'majority', best exemplified in right-wing discourses mobilized during the controversy surrounding the government's intention to initiate public consultation about legislation against discrimination based on sexual orientation.

The LGBT community is not deterred from asserting their identity in the 'public', however. They are to be seen everywhere in the movement, be it at the frontline, in the first-aid or supplies stations, in the 'rainbow village'

in Admiralty, or in Hong Kong Shield, a group established for the monitoring of the use of violence by the police during the movement. Liona and Candice, members of the inter-university activist group Action Q, have witnessed how the Umbrella Movement helps change perceptions and raises public awareness of LGBT issues. For instance, the arrest of a transgender protester in the confrontations in Mongkok has led people to question whether members of the LGBT community are sufficiently protected by the law.

The linkage between the LGBT movement and the Umbrella Movement is not a mere coincidence. With their exchanges with numerous protesters coming from the LGBT community, Liona and Candice come to realize that the everyday experience of sexual minorities actually sows the seeds for their engagement in pro-democracy movements, something that has gone unnoticed even by the protesters themselves. For them, compulsory heterosexuality is as oppressive and unalterable as the 31 August 2014 decision by the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (SCNPC) that rules out genuine universal suffrage (see article by Kwok). Collective struggles have always been the only way for the LGBT community to fight for their deserved rights; such spirit of resistance has been the driving force behind their participation in the Umbrella Movement.

One should also be reminded that sexual minorities are victims under the current undemocratic political system. Because of the presence of the functional constituencies (FCs) in the Legislative Council (Legco) (see article by Kwok), there have been hardly any achievements by the LGBT movement in pushing for the recognition of their rights as citizens. In 2012, legislator Cyd Ho proposed to urge the government to initiate public consultation regarding legislation against discrimination based on sexual orientation. Under the separate voting system, the proposal was vetoed; it secured the support of the majority of the directly-elected geographical constituencies (GCs) (21 votes), but 17 out of 27 of the votes of the FCs were against it. As of 2014, there remains no government plan to initiate the aforementioned consultation process.

We are in the same boat

Many Hongkongers may have clung to their institutionalized heterosexual and male privilege in making claims for citizenship. However, with blocked access to decision-making through suffrage and rights to run for office in elections, everyone in Hong Kong is a second-class citizen. Without doubt, many have made their yearnings heard internationally in the Umbrella Movement, but the voices of women and the LGBT community are neglected. There is a long way to go for Hong Kong's democratization, but without redressing the hypocrisy in excluding women and sexual minorities as viable political actors, the battle will only be made more treacherous.

Epilogue Doing umbrella sociology

Beatrice Oi-yeung Lam

FROM THE JULY 1ST MASS RALLY in 2003 to the Umbrella Movement, social activism empowers Hongkongers as citizens. The new media is often credited for how it pluralizes discourses and mobilizes action. Nonetheless, virtual communities remain susceptible to tendencies to exclude rather than include. This mirrors the apprehension towards diversity in the larger political society, rife with demonizing personal attacks that serve no more than to name and shame.

In these pages, our colleagues and students from the Department of Sociology of The University of Hong Kong spoke of what happens under the Umbrella in the Movement, at the same time doing umbrella sociology: we share marginalized, if not unheard voices, so as to protect them from being swamped. From these voices we learn to understand our personal troubles, from not affording a decent shelter to being questioned about presenting one's sexual identity in the protest area, as public issues. On this premise we learn to listen, put ourselves in others' shoes, and examine our own values, assumptions, interests, and the larger social context in which we find ourselves. In this sense, (umbrella) sociology nurtures our capacity to engage in dialogue and to deliberate, respectfully and reflexively. It is in this way we enable ourselves to guide our communities to democratic decision-making and self-governance – just as what we witness in the flowering of the Umbrella Movement.

Sociology frightens because of how it often exposes the inconvenient truth, just as the Umbrella terrifies, for how it reflects upon and lays bare the cynicism that suffocates local politics. But get under the Umbrella, and we see possibilities of creating ourselves as actors who fight for human dignity, social conscience, and justice, in the process changing our politics and making history. Why should we be afraid of the challenges that the Umbrella brings to our city?

Below: Among others, the study space in the Admiralty occupy area is emblematic of democratic deliberation and organic self-governance from the bottom up. Image courtesy of Jimmy Wong.



Pride under the umbrella: LGBT activism has been fused with Hongkongers' collective struggle for democracy. Image courtesy of Action Q.

