

2023/24 Cohort



Research Proposal

Two Birds with One Stone:
**What Hong Kong's Protest Art Can Tell Us
About Social Movements and Chinese Politics**

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Abstract

With China's growing power, it becomes all the more crucial to examine Hong Kong. As the mainland slowly reclaims the special administrative region through a variety of means, HKSAR exemplifies an ideological clash between citizens and its government. Its rich history and current tumultuous political sphere make it an important case study for the Asia-Pacific region and beyond. Moreover, social movements and public activism around the world are gaining more momentum,¹ as conflicts between states, their people, and other groups are further arising.

Political protest art holds immense power, especially in its ability to move the masses and represent a cause. Visual representations evoke emotions—whether positive, negative, or somewhere in between—and have the means to communicate complex ideas while challenging prevailing standards.² This research aims to delve into the role of protest art in Hong Kong's 2014, 2016, and 2019 demonstrations. Further, it hopes to look at the cultural consequences of the protests, especially its effect on citizens' perceptions of Chinese politics and civic engagement.

Through a variety of research methods including a literature review, ethnography, interviews, and data analysis, this project will shed light on Hong Kong's history of public activism and protest art. The final output will consolidate these mixed methods to produce an extensive report, research poster, and photo essay of Hong Kong's social movement and political culture scene.

Introduction

I attended an arts high school for four years in Toronto, where I was given the freedom to explore my artistic voice, style, and convey any message I wanted through my work. However, it seems that artists and citizens alike are not given the same freedom in Hong Kong, especially after the 2014 Umbrella Movement. I found my preconceptions being questioned, however, after visiting the M+ contemporary art museum in West Kowloon. Almost all the exhibits included some kind of political messaging or critique regarding the Chinese government. The piece that struck me most was *Breathing, Tiananmen Square* by Song Dong, a photograph from 1996 featuring a man lying face first on the ground of Tiananmen Square. I was puzzled by the overt showcase of such politically sensitive images, especially given the relationship between the Beijing government and Hong Kong. Ultimately, the mere display of pieces in the M+ museum seemed to counter the idea that art was becoming increasingly censored in the region.³ Accordingly, my research topic stems from this experience. My goal is to learn more about the history of political protests in the region from a more cultural and artistic perspective.

¹ "The Future of Public Activism: Populations Poised To Increase Pressure Worldwide", *Global Trends*, April 2021. https://www.dni.gov/files/images/globalTrends/GT2040/NIC-2021-02495-Future-of-Public-Activism_18Nov21_UNSOURCED.pdf.

² "Creative Dissent: Exploring the Power of Political Art as a Catalyst for Social Change", *FromLight2Art*, May 9, 2023. <https://fromlight2art.com/political-art-how-can-art-be-political/>.

³ Stephy Chung, "Future of political art in Hong Kong uncertain as Beijing tightens grip". *CNN Style*, 27 May 2020.

Research Objectives & Questions

What role did art play in Hong Kong's protests? More generally, how does political art affect social movements? How has culture and political sentiment in the region changed after the protests?

Background

The 2019 Democratic Protests marked a significant milestone in the fight for democracy in Hong Kong.⁴ Like the 2014 Umbrella Movement, pro-democracy activists rallied against the Chinese government in street protests—this time, however, the actions were prompted by legal revision proposals to Hong Kong's extradition bill, and were much more violent and expansive.⁵ In response, the government cracked down and quelled the protests by convicting activists, vilifying protesters, and censoring the free press.⁶

Much of the literature on social mobilization in post-colonial Hong Kong has focused on its emergence, growth, and response through a political structure lens.⁷ The art, which plays a large part in the resistance movement, has yet to be examined in academic exchanges: analysis of it would undoubtedly help audiences understand the overall growth and progression of the protests, visual themes and narratives, and the aftermath of the movement on Hong Kong culture.

Methodology

In my research, I will delve into the role of protest art in Hong Kong's demonstrations, and the general aftermath in the region using a mixed methods and qualitative approach.

1. Compilation of Source Material

I will compile samples of artworks made from 2014 to 2019, through social media, archives, and other means online. This may include but is not limited to memes, sculptures, cartoons, poster art, public interactive art, and billboards—the Lennon Wall, for example. To subvert the problem of firewalls and pages being taken down, I will use the WaybackMachine, an Internet archive site that allows users to capture, manage and search collections of digital content.⁸

2. Visual Analysis of Source Material

I will sift through the images collected and analyze the visual, conceptual, and ideological themes they draw from. Much of the imagery used in the protest art harkens back to pop culture or historical references and uses crude humor to convey messages;⁹ I will research these patterns and their significance to the movement. Resources such as the China Digital Times, the China Media Project, and independent documentary films would be useful tools to refer to.

⁴ Jessie Yeung, "From an extradition bill to a political crisis: A guide to the Hong Kong protests". *CNN*, 20 December 2019.

⁵ Julia Hollingsworth, "Hong Kong protest timeline: The evolution of a movement". *CNN*, 17 August 2019.

⁶ Maya Wang, "There's a way to fix the Hong Kong crisis". *Human Rights Watch*, 9 October 2019.

⁷ Francis L. F. Lee, Samson Yuen, Gary Tang, and Edmund W. Cheng. "Hong Kong's Summer of Uprising: From Anti Extradition to Anti-Authoritarian Protests." *China Review* 19, no. 4 (2019): 1–32.

⁸ "Wayback Machine". *Internet Archive*, 31 December 2014.

⁹ Jerome Taylor, "The language of Hong Kong's protests: Crude and caustic memes and slogans often turn criticism of movement on its head". *The Japan Times*, 24 June 2019.

3. Fieldwork in Hong Kong

I hope to pair my remote research with fieldwork in Hong Kong, which will amount to a photo essay and report: I'd like to conduct an intensive 4 week-long ethnography of the street art scene in Hong Kong. Through this, I plan to observe the day-to-day in Hong Kong to later compare to accounts online.

4. Remote Expert Interviews

Through Zoom or Google Meet, I will conduct interviews with experts who can speak more about the cultural significance of certain symbols used in art. I hope to hear from people in both the West and in East Asia—for example, Professor Tony Saich at the Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation and Harvard Kennedy School, and University of Toronto Associate Professor Will Kwan.

5. Data Visualization

To supplement my finding from my time in Hong Kong, I will also compile survey data that looks at political and civic engagement in the region. These will draw from academic articles and respected news sources like South China Morning Post. The goal of this step will be to determine Hong Kongers' opinions of civic engagement and politics before and after the protests, using existing data.

6. Final Deliverable(s)

My research will amount to a final report summing up my findings, as well as a polished version of my photo essay. The ultimate aim of these two pieces will be to answer both of my original research questions respectively, and begin further conversation on protest art and social movements in an Asia-Pacific and global context.

Training/ Certifications Needed

N/A

Research Location

I will be in Toronto for most of the research period; however, I plan to travel to Hong Kong for 4 weeks to examine the cultural changes in the region, as per the second research question in my proposal.

Research Ethics Board

My project will not require REB approval. Although I will be remotely interviewing experts regarding protest art and Hong Kong's culture, the information provided will only be to supplement conclusions about the significance or symbolism of my findings. I will steer clear of involving vulnerable individuals in my interactions, whether it be in Hong Kong or in Toronto—in person or virtually.

Timeline

PRE-RESEARCH PERIOD (APRIL 1ST – JUNE 16TH)				
	<i>Week #</i>	<i>Start Date</i>	<i>Purpose</i>	<i>Duration</i>
April	A	1 st	Initial readings and preparation for literature review (noting locations for travel, important themes in Hong Kong culture, significance of protest art generally → creating summaries of each source)	April 1 st to May 6 th (5 weeks)
	B	8 th		
	C	15 th		
	D	22 nd		
May	E	6 th		
	F	13 th	Compilation of source material and potential interviewees; begin reaching out to interviewee candidates	May 13 th to 27 th (2 weeks)
	G	20 th	Visual analysis of source material; planning photo essay	April 20 th to June 16 th (4 weeks)
	H	27 th		
RESEARCH PERIOD (JUNE 17TH – JULY 29TH)				
	<i>Week #</i>	<i>Start Date</i>	<i>Purpose</i>	<i>Duration</i>
June	1	17 th	Fieldwork in Hong Kong begins	June 17 th to July 15 th (4 weeks)
	2	24 th		
July	3	1 st	Fieldwork in Hong Kong continues	June 17 th to July 15 th (4 weeks)
	4	8 th		
	5	15 th	Fieldwork in Hong Kong ends; consolidation of notes, photos, and observations (writing, editing, planning photo essay), interviews with experts and data visualization	July 15 th to 31 st (2 weeks)
	6	22 nd	Interviews with experts and data visualization; finish photo essay; begin deliverables	
POST-RESEARCH PERIOD (AUGUST 1ST – AUGUST 31ST)				
	<i>Week #</i>	<i>Start Date</i>	<i>Purpose</i>	<i>Duration</i>
August	N/A	1 st	Put together all final deliverables (research poster, final report, photo essay)	April 1 st to May 6 th (5 weeks)

Note: The planning process for the ethnography/fieldwork in Hong Kong will take place as soon as possible, over the course of the April to May period leading up to the trip. Budget considerations will also happen over the course of this period; however, it is likely that Week D (Pre-Research Period) will be dedicated to pre-determining financial needs, while Week 3 (during the Research Period) will be allotted for ensuring all subsidized items are clearly compiled and tracked after the trip.

Resources & Support Needed

N/A

Potential Impact

This research is relevant to several fields, including political science, visual studies, journalism, sociology, and urban studies; personally, it also ties into my intended majors of Public Policy and International Relations. Although my research hopes to highlight the role of art as a tool to convey dissent in Hong Kong, it also becomes increasingly relevant today, everywhere. As conflict, political movements, and demonstrations—the Russia-Ukraine war and Israel-Palestine war, BLM movement, and Just Stop Oil demonstration, for example—continue to become more common, protest art becomes even more significant. This type of art immortalizes a visceral and deeply human reaction, and epitomizes the passion that drives social change.

References

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