

# Art Amidst Protest: Understanding Hong Kong's Political Street Art

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## 1 Introduction

On June 9 of 2019, one million demonstrators rallied for a march in Hong Kong, against a proposed bill which allowed for the extradition of Hong Kongers to mainland China (Extradition Bill). This marked the start of the city's biggest political crisis and the "broadest expression of public anger" against Beijing in decades: the Anti-Extradition Bill Movement quickly exploded into violent clashes between police and citizens. Protesters employed vigilantism and mob justice, causing police forces to retaliate with tear gas and other means—fuelling anger and pressure from both sides. Amidst the chaos and demonstrations, protesters used visual materials to convey their discontent and commitment to the movement.

## 2 Objectives

What role did art play in Hong Kong's protests?

How does political art affect social movements?

How has culture and political sentiment in the region changed after the protests?

## 3 Methodology

This project sought to contribute to a broader discussion on art's role in social movements through:

- A literature review
- Fieldwork
- Qualitative and quantitative analysis of over 500 photos of symbolic objects [1]

## 4 Key Themes

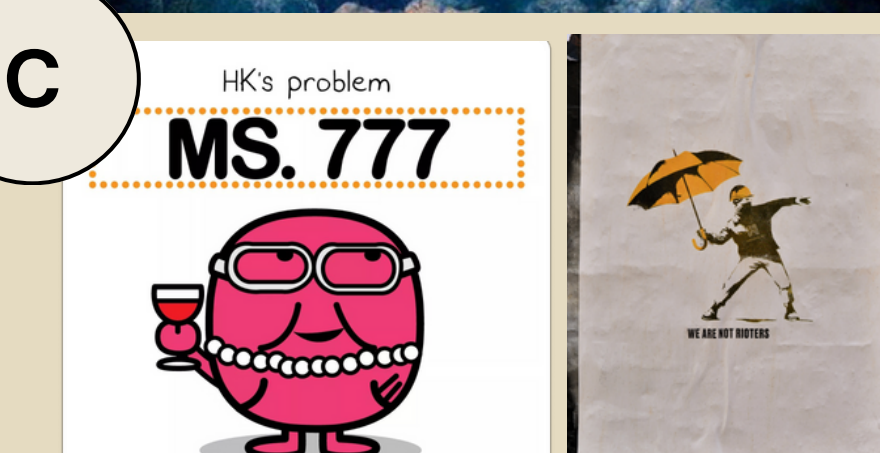
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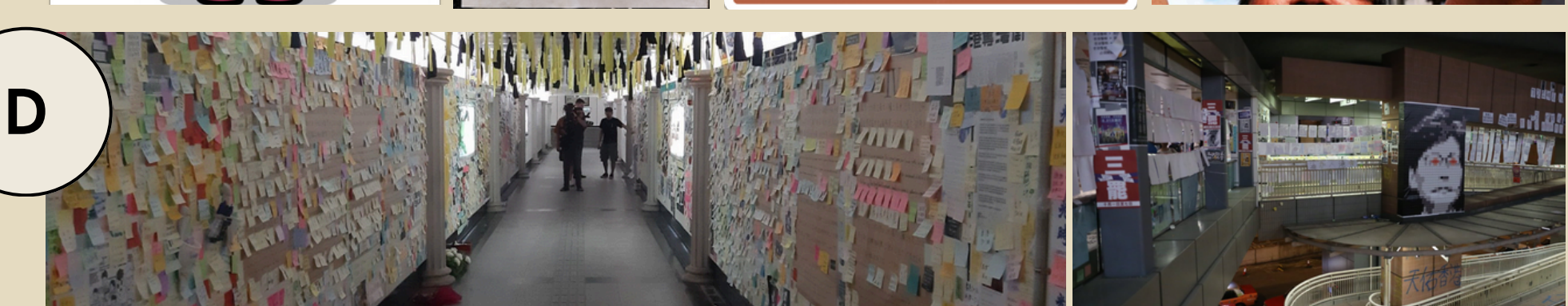
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D



### A. Pop Culture References

Much of the protest material took inspiration from stories of struggle in fiction, reminiscent of protesters' own fight at the time. Inspiration was also drawn from internet culture, specifically, memes from the app LIHKG. The use of memes in rallies helps protesters convey a consistent, easily digestible brand through familiar characters. Furthermore, the manifestation of an online character in real life both symbolizes and elicits a range of emotional responses.

### B. Foreign Messaging and Calls to Action

Appealing to the foreign masses, protesters also incorporated historical references, especially those of French origin. Foreign symbols of liberty and democracy like Eugène Delacroix's Liberty Leading the People became allegories for the movement. Pieces also implored democratic governments to take action against the Chinese government and support Hong Kong's pro-democracy cause. This battle against authoritarianism was illustrated by contrasting the Chinese flag with other states' in both writing and imagery.

### C. Police and Government Opposition

In symbolic objects and illustrations, protesters sport brave faces and raised fists; pro-mainland legislators' faces, on the other hand, are demonized and contorted. Police and government officials were marked as the "enemy"; their likenesses were crudely represented and stood in stark contrast to the heroic depictions of demonstrators.

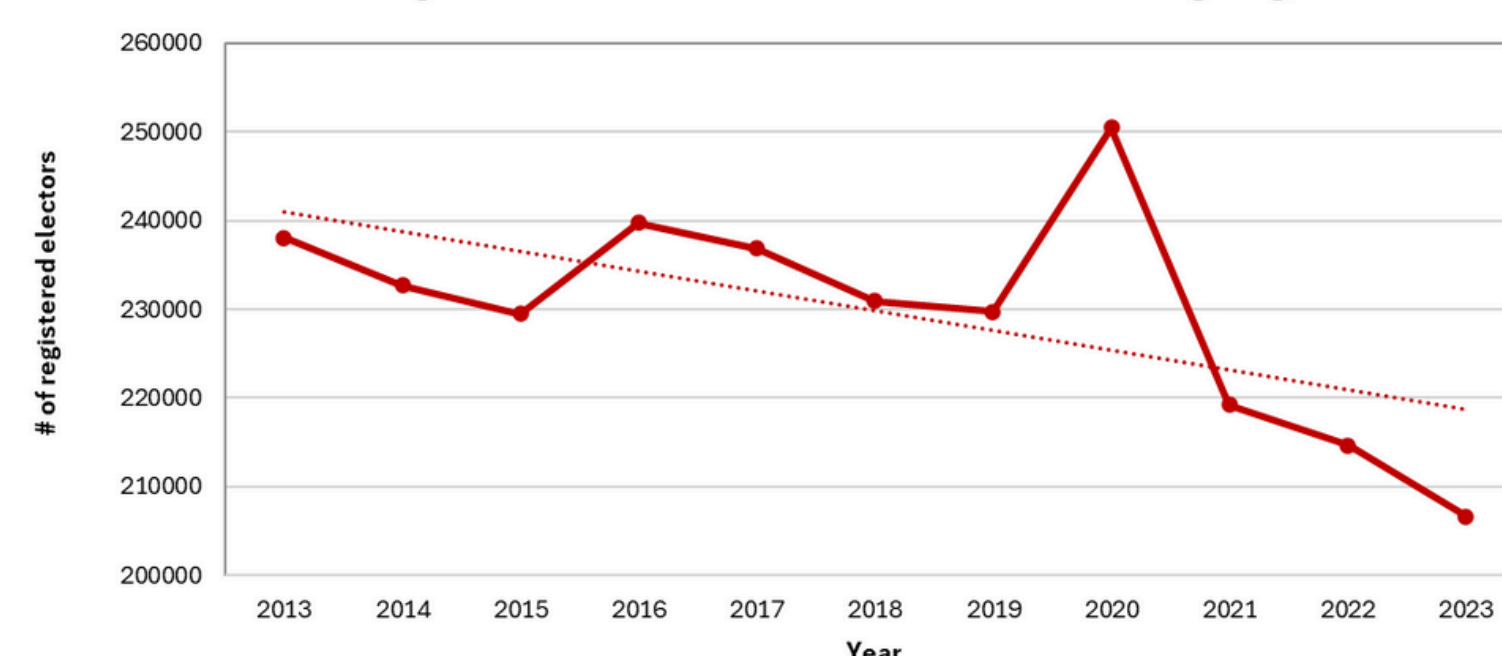
### D. Lennon Walls and Other Symbols

Anti-ELAB protesters turned various mundane spaces into sites of resistance using symbolic objects. This tangible change in the city was marked especially by the establishment of Lennon Walls and statues like the Goddess of Democracy. Slogans, which are manifestations of collective action frames or "action-oriented sets of beliefs" that legitimize social movements, were also promoted through these symbols. [2]

## 5 Implications

- The Anti-ELAB movement produced an **extraordinary number of symbolic objects** and **transformed everyday spaces into public exhibitions of political art**; this forever changed the perception of seemingly innocuous or mundane locations (ie subway stations, pedestrian walkways, bridges).
- Contentious politics, protests, and social movements are vehicles of urban change; the art produced as a byproduct is, equally, a **tool for urban change**. In Hong Kong's case, the prominence and scale of these pieces was a bold statement **forcing people to partake in pivotal conversation about the region's future**, and played a part in driving the movement's narrative.
- Today, **faint traces of protest material can still be found** across Hong Kong. The Anti-ELAB movement and consequent 2023 National Security Law has overall led to a decrease in population and expression of political opinion, and a rift between younger and older generations.

Number of Registered Electors of Functional Constituencies in Hong Kong, 2013-2023



Number of Registered Electors of Functional Constituencies in Hong Kong; a spike in 2020 was followed by a drastic decrease in civic engagement in the aftermath of the protests. Accessed through HKSAR government open-source data. [3]

### Notes

[1] Symbolic objects are powerful and potent signifiers during times of political turmoil, which denote "resistance, collective action, and peoplehood"; they can take the form of posters, banners, statues, or other objects with notable meaning in the context of the environment. Peter Gardner and Benjamin Abrams. "Contentious Politics and Symbolic Objects," in *Symbolic Objects in Contentious Politics*, edited by Peter Gardner and Benjamin Abrams, 13–36. University of Michigan Press, 2023. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3998/mpub.11722857.6>.

[2] This allowed for protesters to focus attention on certain elements, articulate them, and transform them into actions. Francis L. Lee, F., 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. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26838911>.

[3] "No. of registered electors of functional constituencies in 2013-2022 (English)," Data.Gov.HK, October 29, 2022. <https://data.gov.hk/en-data/dataset/hk-reo-reopsi01-voter-registration-statistics/resource/ec077c12-4169-4417-906d1b47cb0bf51a>.

Images from Internet Archive and X.

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