



Summer Research Reflection

Deliverable 4
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Hong Kong, 2024.

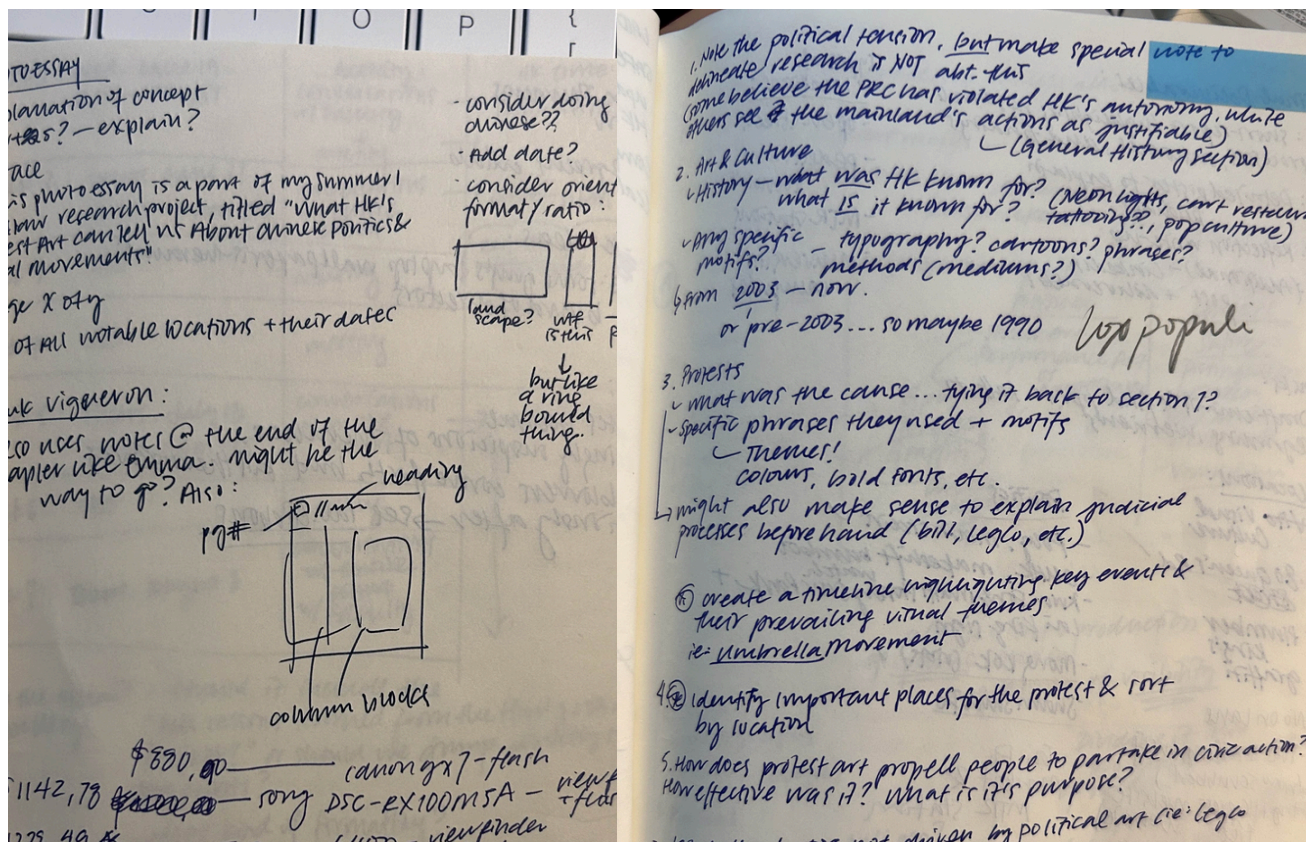
To Preface

The seeds of this project were planted after I returned from Hong Kong in 2023, just before my first year of university. I was eager to begin with my courses and I had a yearning to find out more about both my heritage and the world of geopolitics. Through the Munk One first-year foundation program, I was able to discover that I truly enjoyed research: I loved the process of gathering, compiling, and analysing real data—whether qualitative or quantitative—to reach a conclusion. When I stumbled upon the Laidlaw Scholars Program, I knew it would be an opportunity I’d regret missing out on if I didn’t take it to pursue this topic.

My research seeks to contribute to a broader discussion on art’s role in social movements, using Hong Kong as a primary case study. I broke my topic down into three questions: 1) What role did art play in Hong Kong’s protests? 2) More generally, how does political art affect social movements? 3) Finally, how has culture and political sentiment in the region changed after the protests? For the first two questions, I employed digital tools to reach a conclusion; I analysed protest art produced by the Anti-Extradition Bill movement (Anti-ELAB), and identified themes to draw commonalities from. For the third question, I conducted a 4-week ethnography in Hong Kong to investigate changes in the city from a political art perspective, in the aftermath of the 2019 pro-democracy demonstrations. In this reflection, I will tackle my progression chronologically, address the challenges I faced during my research process, and end with some “self-constructive-criticism” where I reflect on the pros and cons of my entire journey. All photos included in this report were taken and edited by me, unless stated otherwise.

In Preparation

In preparation for the summer research period, our cohort had to deliver on a finalised version of our project budget and proposal. I met with my research advisor several times to chat about my proposal and research approach, but he essentially gave me the liberty to go about my project as I saw fit. Although I ended up changing a bit of the methodology, there were no big hiccups. The budget, however, turned into a ball of stress that kept rolling back and forth in my mind. Because my international experience was due to occur this summer, I had to figure out my plane tickets as soon as possible. I initially booked a flight that was just about 2.5k, the amount we had allotted for our flights generously provided by Laidlaw. However, due to some misunderstanding about budget approvals, I had to rebook—a time delay which increased the price to 2.7k. I was ecstatic to learn, however, that this extra portion could be reimbursed by Laidlaw and the University of Toronto. With the budget confirmed, I started to familiarise myself with the literature. As I read article after article, I took notes and tried to extract parts I believed would be useful to contextualise my research. I soon realised that I did not know how to organise this process, however. I was too caught up in catching the details, and hadn't thought about the final output of my research. I decided to zero in on figuring out what I would tackle in my report, and adopted a blank notebook to jot down all my ideas regarding this project.



Some notes from the very beginning of my research. On the left, I was trying to figure out the layout I wanted to use for my photo essay based off other research formats; on the right, I had begun to sort my sections and write about the content I hoped to include under each.

As I continued planning and conducting my literature review, I found myself developing better project management and design thinking skills. I further broke down my research questions to keep myself grounded, and gave myself deadlines based on their importance to my trip to Hong Kong in June. This helped me easily identify which tasks to prioritise. Through the myriad of readings I was doing, I was also able to choose a niche to focus on, changing my approach very slightly: rather than using both the 2014 and 2019 protests, I chose to look at protest art created during 2019 given the more widely available source material.

As June 17—the date of my flight—quickly approached, I became more anxious about conducting my fieldwork. I felt some apprehension and a tinge of imposter syndrome regarding my topic: as a second-generation immigrant who had never lived in Hong Kong, I didn't know if I was qualified to discuss potentially sensitive politics. From a strictly research standpoint, I wasn't sure what to expect in Hong Kong; because I was conducting an ethnography, I knew I couldn't plan every minute detail, but instead let myself absorb information as I roamed the city. Moreover, as I completed my Safety Abroad module (as required by all University of Toronto students going abroad), I noticed that Hong Kong was marked yellow by the Canadian Travel Advisory board, meaning it was necessary to “exercise a high degree of caution”. The website warned journalists and travellers to “be particularly vigilant if researching or reporting on subjects sensitive to the government”. This was mildly alarming, but also another reminder to follow my set plan and approach the topic with a reasonable level of curiosity and openmindedness.

Discovery, Analysis, and Gratitude

My four weeks in Hong Kong flew by. I took photos of everything I saw that was remotely related to politics and art—and everything in between—and I scrawled notes in my notebooks whenever I felt the need to. These fieldnotes helped me establish the structure of my final report and gave me a good start for the deliverables. Since I had already written a draft of my literature review by the time I flew to Hong Kong, I was able to apply theoretical, historical, and contextual aspects to my fieldwork. This step gave me a much needed understanding of how Hong Kong evolved as a city, both culturally and politically; it therefore also provided space for newfound appreciation. I was especially shocked, however, to find trace remains of the 2019 protest through small pieces of graffiti or discreet references in imagery. Comparing my own photos of the city to images from 2019 online, the change became very apparent: it was impressive to see how much the city had evolved in just a few years. Roads and walkways once infamously protest locations now peacefully facilitated the everyday life of citizens.

Moreover, during the research period abroad, I was especially grateful to have been raised speaking Cantonese. Being able to communicate well enough helped me get used to Hong Kong much faster, and allowed me to feel less anxious about my plans going awry. Speaking the local language also gave me opportunities to connect with Hong Kongers more organically; for example, I overheard a conversation about how the owner of a café in Yau Ma Tei was an artist and carved out a creative career for himself.

I also used my mediocre Cantonese to apologise profusely after accidentally stepping on a man's foot in the MTR. Furthermore, I attended a Common Purpose workshop with students from the University of Hong Kong and the University of Birmingham; my dual identity as a Canadian-born-Chinese individual further allowed me to understand, befriend, and bond with both groups.



Hong Kong Museum of Art on July 1st. Select museums had free admission as part of the Establishment Day celebrations; I planned to visit, but was deterred by the long line.



Lei Yue Mun, a fishing village in Hong Kong's Kwun Tong district.

Challenges and Thoughts In Hindsight

Overall, I found organising my research to be the most challenging aspect of my project—but also the most satisfying once I had problem-solved and ironed out the issues. My research supervisor gave me free reign; from this, I learned to set my own deadlines, manage my time, and implement design thinking skills. I really appreciated the freedom to conduct my research however I liked, and as independently as I wanted. Moreover, I found myself most motivated by my own desire to learn about my research topic, and therefore didn't dread the work that came with this project. At times, I did feel a bit consumed by the amount of work that I had set out to do, and had to come to terms with what was realistically doable within the allotted research period. Nonetheless, the only aspect I regretted about my approach was not writing more about the evolution of Hong Kong's overall visual culture in my final report. The page and time constraints meant I had to narrow the scope of my research and edit my writing down to its most concise and direct version.

Looking back at the capacities outlined by the introductory Laidlaw slideshow, I resonate most with the idea of global citizenship—especially after being exposed to so many different people from different walks of life in Hong Kong and delving deeply into the Hong Kong protests. With the sensitivity of my topic, I was careful to include diverse opinions in citation to document the most holistic presentation of the protests' complexities. On a more personal note, I think this project also solidified my appreciation for Hong Kong as a city and my own heritage. Ultimately, this research journey has been eye-opening, not only academically and career-wise but also in terms of fostering an appreciation of the diversity of people and perspectives in the world.

August 19, 2024.