

Refereed article

## Protest Geographies and Cross-Modal Icons in Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement

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### Summary

In September 2014, thousands of people occupied the heart of Hong Kong's state and corporate power, the central business district. This paper provides a snapshot of the first days of the events that resulted in what would ultimately become a 79-day-long occupation, which eventually came to be known as the "Umbrella Movement." The paper first maps the protest geographies, focusing on the symbolism of place. It then proceeds to decipher the symbols employed by the protestors both in urban public and in digital space. The paper argues that the transformation of tangible everyday items like the umbrella into intangible digital icons demonstrates resilience in the face of state coercion in physical space. Acknowledging the symbolism of place and its inherent contestation, the paper, moreover, shows that the symbols that became cross-modal icons were those that were non-place-specific ones, and thus those shared by a wider collective. Finally, the article suggests it is important to reflect on the distribution of leadership across a wider collective and via different media forms. The data is drawn from participant observation on Hong Kong Island and Kowloon during the week of university class boycotts, from September 21–26, 2014, before the official start of Occupy Central — as well as from internet ethnography, newspaper analysis, and secondary literature research too.

**Keywords:** Public space, social media, social movements, symbols, Hong Kong, Occupy Central

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## Introduction

In September 2014, thousands of people occupied the central business district (CBD) of Hong Kong — or what is popularly referred to as “Central” — in order to claim democratic freedom from the Socialist government in Beijing. Protests, initially, started out at Tamar Park in Admiralty on Hong Kong Island, and within a few days spontaneously spread to the neighboring district of Causeway Bay and Mongkok in Kowloon — where, likewise, protest camps were also erected. This 79-day-long occupation, which came to be known as the “Umbrella Movement,” constituted another incidence of networked social movements. In such movements, actors collectively appropriate central symbolic places in the city while simultaneously employing social networking tools such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and the like.

In his account of “#Occupy Everywhere,” Juris distinguishes between the “logics of networking,” which he depicts as “a cultural framework that helps give rise to practices of communication and coordination across diversity and difference on the part of collective,” and the “logics of aggregation,” (2012: 260) which denotes the actual taking and occupation of symbolic urban space. Overall, Juris (2012: 260) considers protest and communicative practices both in virtual and physical space as “mutually constitutive.” The power of aggregation and assemblage in urban public space is emphasized by Harvey as well. In his book *Rebel Cities* (2012), he introduces the concept of “political commons.” People produce political commons by placing their bodies in symbolic spaces close to the center of power. Political commons are a “place for open discussion and debate over what that power is doing and how best to oppose its reach” (Harvey 2012: 161).

In effect, the appropriation of physical space is crucial in challenging the current political order. Public space constitutes an arena, one where negotiations about the common good take place. The meanings attached to a particular public space are never stable and fixed, but rather dynamic and continuously negotiated. As a consequence, conflicts between various social groups and individuals can arise about the meanings assigned to a particular place. Scholars agree that although the use of social media assists in aggregating larger amounts of people within a short space of time in urban space, the use of new media does not alter the operation of these movements altogether. Rather, social technologies are integrated into existing practices and social relations — assisting in the diffusion of new dynamics of activism (Baym 1998; Bennett and Segerberg 2012; Juris 2012; Tilly 2004). In Hong Kong, the integration of new media into existing social relationships has contributed to the upscaling of protests since the start of the new century (Chan and Lee 2007; da Rimini 2013).

Nonetheless, the use of digital communicative practices and infrastructures does affect these movements’ modes of organization. Research on networked social

movements, particularly the global Occupy ones, indicates that the employment of social media facilitates horizontal and participatory forms of organization (Bennett and Segerberg 2012; Castells 2012; Constanza-Chock 2012; Juris 2012; Tufekci 2014). In order to grasp these changing forms of organization, Bennett and Segerberg (2012) introduce the term “connective action.” According to these two authors, connective action is based on personalized content-sharing across media networks — in contrast to collective action, which requires access to extensive organizational resources. Consequently, organizational and coordinative functions are distributed between a wide array of different actors. This finding corresponds to the movements’ self-descriptions. While Occupy Wall Street perceived itself as a “leaderful” movement (Constanza-Choc 2012: 383), student leaders in Hong Kong reversed this motto by stating “No leaders, only the mass” (Cheng and Chan 2017: 232).

Ultimately, the Umbrella Movement differed from previous networked social movements like Occupy Wall Street as it was the manifestation of a very specific political demand, one related to the legislative process, and in the final reckoning to the postcolonial project.<sup>1</sup> That is why citizens had a very specific addressee regarding their demand, namely the Hong Kong government (Kurfürst 2017). Accordingly, the question of representation — who is allowed to negotiate with the Hong Kong government — appeared to be decisive for the movement’s success. Against this background, this article examines the symbols produced both in urban public and in digital space in the course of the Umbrella Movement — and what they say about this particular movement’s modes of organization and leadership.

In what follows, I will first map the protest geographies and then analyze the evolution of icons across different media forms. In the course of the occupation tangible objects like the umbrella were transformed into digital symbols through an iconic process. Acknowledging the symbolism of place and its inherent contestation, I show that the symbols that became cross-modal icons were those that were non-place-specific ones, and thus those shared by a wider collective. Moreover I show that the transformation of everyday items like the umbrella into digital icons demonstrates resilience as citizens faced state coercion in physical space. Finally, the article reflects on the distribution of leadership across a wider collective and via different media. The data is drawn from participant observation on Hong Kong Island and Kowloon during the week of university class boycotts, from September 21–26, 2014, before the official start of Occupy Central — as well as from internet ethnography, newspaper analysis, and secondary literature research too.

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1 According to Castells (2012), the social movements witnessed in recent years — like the Indignados or Arab Spring — originated from a combination of a structural economic crisis and one also of legitimacy for the respective governments and political institutions.

## History of protests and protest norms

Hong Kong has a history of taking sociopolitical struggles to the streets. Protests rooted among the working class started in the 1950s. In 1966, meanwhile, the hunger strike by a young worker protesting a fare increase at the Star Ferry Pier resulted in the first mass protest, with thousands of young people joining in (Ku 2012). Moreover, the evolution of the Democratic Party of Hong Kong is closely linked to the watershed events of 1989. Ever since the student protests at Tiananmen Square in that year, and following the transfer of Hong Kong to the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1997, an urban public protest culture has developed. The anniversaries of these events are still important dates, mobilizing citizens to engage in further public protests (Schucher and Holbig 2014). To commemorate the events of Tiananmen Square, for example, Hong Kong citizens gather annually on June 4 — holding candlelight vigils at Victoria Park on Hong Kong Island (da Rimini 2013).

On July 1, 2003 more than five million people assembled in the streets to protest against national security legislation and the general incompetence of the Hong Kong government under Chief Executive Tung Chee Hwa. In fact the July 1 protests initiated a “new pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong” (Chan and Lee 2007: 215–216), resulting in more large-scale demonstrations in the period from 2004 until 2006. These collective actions all adhered to the principle of maintaining a “civic quality” and order in public space, originating from colonial times.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, the protests were all driven by the mandate of being “peaceful, rational, non-violent and non-profane” (Yuen 2018: 7). While protestors aimed to attain policy concessions from the government, they nevertheless also sought to avoid violent confrontations with the authorities.

The role of the media in the pro-democracy demonstration in 2003 has been outlined by Chan and Lee (2007). In their analysis, they identify a “two-step flow model of social influence” (Chan and Lee 2007: 219). In the first step, citizens who decided to participate in the demonstration early on received information from the media. In the second one, they then themselves distributed such information through their personal networks. The two authors' research indicates that people were more likely to join protests with their families and friends than participate with social or political groups to which they belonged.

In protests against the demolition of the historic Star Ferry Pier in 2006, people likewise marshalled digital networks through mobile phones and the internet to mobilize friends and family to the site of protest (da Rimini 2013). In other words,

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2 In nineteenth-century Hong Kong, the colonial government sought to establish social order by manipulating the urban built environment. Public parks became sites of citizens' moral education, contributing to the construction of a good colonial government and “civilized” Chinese society (Cheung and Tang 2015).

the new democracy movements departed from previous protests in their making use of digital networks to assemble more and more people in public space. Although social media platforms — such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube — have been blocked in mainland China since 2009 (Bondes and Schucher 2015), people living in Hong Kong were still able to access a wide array of websites informing them about Occupy Central during the first days of its existence. Some days after the official start of the occupation, however, Chinese authorities banned the terms “Hong Kong tear gas,” “Hong Kong police,” “Occupy Central,” and “Umbrella Movement” from Weibo, China’s microblogging site. Additionally, they blocked Instagram, a photo- and video-sharing platform (Vlastelica 2014). Nonetheless citizens continued assembling on the streets, while simultaneously coordinating protests, debating, and reasoning in digital space. As will be shown, digital icons demonstrated semiotic resilience in the face of state coercion. While tangible symbols found in public spaces were torn down when the protests were eventually dissolved in December 2014, those circulating in digital space persisted long after — notwithstanding China’s attempts at blocking and controlling particular websites and hashtags.

### **Motives and main actors of the Occupy movement**

In 1997 British rule over Hong Kong ended, and the territory was transferred to China — with it receiving the status of a “Special Administrative Region.” In line with the principle of “one country, two systems,” Hong Kong has maintained its liberal economic order as well as a more or less autonomous government. Yet, as a colonial legacy, Hong Kong has retained also its Executive-led government, which is not directly elected by the people (Tang and Wong 2008). Until 1997, the governor of Hong Kong was appointed by the British government in London. With Hong Kong’s return to China, however, the chief executive was now to be voted in by an election committee instead. In its first term of office, the committee was comprised of 400 representatives. The number hereof subsequently increased to 1,200 during the third term meanwhile. Although representatives come from different functional groups, there appears to have been a bias in favor of pro-China and business factions (Chan 2014).

The Basic Law, promulgated in 1990, determined the composition and selection process of the Legislative Council and of the chief executive for the first three terms of office after 1997. The ultimate aim was to have a fully elected Legislative Council and chief executive based on universal suffrage. The Basic Law left room for the government in Beijing to decide if there was any need to alter the selection process after the third term. Effectively, it would have been possible to change the selection method for the first time around 2005. However, the central government maintained that there was no need for change or to establish free and direct elections for the Legislative Council and for the chief executive (Chan 2014).

In December 2007 the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress of the PRC mentioned for the first time the possibility of holding direct elections for the chief executive position in 2017, followed by for the Legislative Council in 2020. Since this announcement, discussions have focused on Article 45 of the Basic Law, which stipulates that the chief executive "shall be elected by universal suffrage upon nomination by a broadly representative nomination committee in accordance with a democratic process" (Chan 2014: 573). In December 2013 the Hong Kong government introduced a consultation process that eventually came to an end in May 2014. In June of the same year the State Council of China published a "One Country, Two Systems White Paper," indicating that only those who "love" China and Hong Kong would be designated as candidates for chief executive. On August 31 the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress of the PRC established that, based on this selection criterion, only two or three candidates would be allowed to run for chief executive, thereby formally rejecting the pan-democratic camp's call for open nominations (Chan 2014; Lee 2015; Luk 2014; Tong 2017).

This act came to be known as the "8.31 Framework". The announcement of the 8.31 Framework on August 31 came at a very symbolic time, only three months after the 25th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square protests and two months after the anniversary of Hong Kong's transfer to China (Schucher and Holbig 2014). In response, citizens mobilized to occupy the CBD, in order to claim universal suffrage from the government in Beijing.

This claim was openly expressed by the movement that would officially be called "Occupy Central with Love and Peace" (OCLP). In March 2013, Benny Tai, an associate professor of Law at the University of Hong Kong, Chan Kin-Man, a professor of Sociology, and Reverend Chu Yiu-ming of the Chai Wan Baptist Church founded OCLP as a civil disobedience movement with the aim to "elect the chief executive and the entire members of the Legislative Council of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region via universal suffrage" (OCLP 2015). To frame their political demands, OCLP used the signifier of Occupy Central that had been established by activists in 2011 already — a Hong Kong-based response to the global Occupy movements then occurring (Liu 2017). From the very beginning OCLP propagated the mandate of nonviolence, making explicit that tactics of blockading roads and occupying urban spaces were regarded as only last resorts (Lam 2015; Tong 2017).

OCLP was joined by diverse student groups, among them Scholarism and the Hong Kong Federation of Students (HKFS). Scholarism was founded in 2011 in reaction to the Beijing government's attempt to introduce Chinese patriotism classes into the Hong Kong school curriculum. The group's founder was Joshua Wong, who was an 18-year-old student when the protest began in 2014. The HKFS, meanwhile, is an umbrella organization comprising tertiary student unions. In 2014 the federation was

represented by its secretary general, Alex Chow Yong-kang, and its deputy head, Lester Shum (Epoch Times 2014).

In short, the movement was primarily led by youth activists — as protestors were generally younger than the Hong Kong population's average age, well-educated, and mostly ethnic Hong Kong Chinese. Although the student associations took on a prominent role in the organization and coordination of protests, students actually made up only one-quarter of the urban movement (Cheng and Chan 2017; Richardson 2018). However, the class boycotts that preceded the occupation of Central started out at tertiary institutions. Finally, Hong Kong's center of political power was occupied by students moving from the Chinese University campus to the Admiralty area.

## Protest geographies

On Monday, September 22, 2014 I visited the campus of the University of Hong Kong in the morning to meet with colleagues. The campus was rather quiet, which I assumed was due to semester break. As I learned later that day, however, students had not attended classes as they were participating in the boycotting of them. While the occupation of Central had initially been scheduled for October 1, 2014, a Chinese national holiday, the HKFS announced a week-long boycott of classes in tertiary institutions already by September 22 (Tong 2017). Students began to gather at the Chinese University of Hong Kong on the Northern Territories campus, close to the border with the PRC. Students from all over Hong Kong assembled here, wearing yellow ribbons. On September 23, the HKFS joined forces with Scholarism meanwhile (Lee 2015; Tong 2017).

From my conversations on the campus of the University of Hong Kong I learnt that students would occupy Tamar Park during the time period of class boycotts. That is why I made my way to Central on Wednesday, September 24. Embarking on the ferry from Kowloon to Hong Kong Island, I got into conversation with two graduates from the University of Hong Kong's Faculty of Architecture. They were quite astonished when I told them that I was on my way to the protests in Tamar Park, responding that they were not about to start until October 1. One of my interlocutors had actually planned on joining the protests on the weekend. As she heard that the protests were now preponed, which she verified by checking the website of the local *Apple Daily* newspaper, she spontaneously joined me. She took me from the North Point Ferry Pier to the mass transit railway to go to Admiralty Station. Getting off at Admiralty, we followed two students shouting through a megaphone as part of navigating people towards Tamar Park.

### **Admiralty: Contested center of power**

Tamar Park is a large public space connecting the waterfront with a government complex that comprises the Office of the Chief Executive, the Legislative Council, and the Central Government Office. The history of Tamar Park dates back to colonial times, when it housed the naval base and dockyard of the British Royal Navy in Hong Kong. The park is named after the royal navy troopship HMS *Tamar*, referring to the Tamar River in Cornwall. During the night of June 30, 1997, the British Hong Kong flag and the Union Jack were lowered for the last time on the Tamar parade ground — marking the end of the Royal Navy shore base, HMS *Tamar*, and the end of British rule in Hong Kong (Legislative Council 2008; Royal Navy Research Archive). In 2011 the Hong Kong government moved from its former location on Government Hill on Hong Kong Island to Tamar. In effect, the relocation of the government complex marked a departure from British colonial heritage. Since then, Tamar has evolved as a popular site of public protest (Lee 2015). Apart from Tamar Park, Civic Square, close to government headquarters, has become an important site of public protest in Central (Yuen 2018). Accordingly, the place's symbolism is constituted by its location at the center of political power.

**Figure 1: Assembly at Tamar Park, September 24, 2014**



Source: Author's own photograph.



On the afternoon of September 24, 2014, students lined the path from the Admiralty Metro Station to the park, distributing yellow ribbons along the way. Students shouting through a megaphone navigated passersby through the occupied space. Different universities had set up their own stalls and assemblies in Tamar Park. The Social Work Department of the University of Hong Kong, which was very much engaged in the protests, erected its own camp. University instructors organized "citizen classes" outside the Legislative Council building. On the green leading to the sea, a black banner with white Chinese characters lay on the ground. The text was drawn from a famous Chinese saying: "As long as you can breathe, there is hope." Passersby were invited to make written or painted contributions. Next to the banner a student with a megaphone announced the march towards Central at 3 p.m. Other participants handed out schedules in both Chinese and English, which provided information on the different lectures that were planned for the following days.

Although the sun burned down, the students gathered peacefully at sites outside the government complex, in the amphitheater listening to young women and men giving speeches, or sitting on the grass behind the Executive building. This collective practice of sitting on the grass was already a form of protest, since sitting on the lawn is usually prohibited in Hong Kong. In the city's parks and gardens numerous prohibition signs educate users about appropriate civic conduct. Overall, the use of urban public space as one of social interaction and communication among urban dwellers is restricted and highly regulated. In fact, this transgressive act of sitting on the grass corresponds to Harvey's (2012) earlier-mentioned definition of political commons. By placing their bodies in the park next to the government headquarters, the citizens of Hong Kong turned the symbolic public space of Tamar Park into political commons — thereby defining the common good and challenging the political status quo.

The first days at Tamar Park were peaceful and nonviolent, adhering to OCLP's mandate of a peaceful protest and in line with established protest norms. The first confrontations between protestors and the police occurred on September 26. That day, students and their supporters attempted to enter Civic Square, which had been cordoned off by metal fences. The police detained seventy-four protestors, among them Joshua Wong (Scholarism), Alex Chow, and Lester Shum (both HKFS). Following their arrest, more and more citizens took to the streets in the Admiralty area. On September 28, the police blocked all street access to Tamar Park after Benny Tai (OCLP) had announced the official start of Occupy with Love and Peace outside government headquarters.

In the afternoon, police fired tear gas for the first time during the demonstrations. While Wong, Chow, and Shum were released from police custody in the evening, protestors had already begun to occupy the streets in Causeway Bay and Mongkok too. These protest sites evolved spontaneously as protestors were prevented from

entering the Admiralty area, both by the police and through the suspension of public transport. Protestors and neighboring residents helped to install improvised supply stations, sanitary facilities, public libraries, study rooms, vegetable patches, as well as temples and churches at the protest sites. Even as the state suspended the provision of public goods on-site, such as garbage disposal and policing, Hong Kong citizens self-organized to keep the camp in Admiralty clean and safe. OCLP and student groups filled the gap left behind by the state, setting up what they called “marshal teams” (Cheng 2016; Cheng and Chan 2017; Lee 2015; Liu 2017; Tong 2017; Yuen 2018). Protestors were supported by nongovernmental organizations as well, which supplied tents and loudspeakers, while anonymous donors provided goggles, masks, water, and food. Teams of motorcyclists drove around the protest areas dropping off supplies (Ngo et al. 2014).

Within only two days protest sites diversified as they became spatially dispersed across the city, resulting in the emergence of the movement’s eventual “polycentric” structure (Cheng and Chan 2017). These sites differed according to their geography and symbolism. The protest camp in Admiralty on Hong Kong Island developed close to the center of political power. By contrast, the camps in Causeway Bay, located east of Admiralty, and Mongkok, in Kowloon, evolved on the periphery, as people who were not able to get to the main protest site in Admiralty assembled on the streets there instead.

### **Causeway Bay and Mongkok**

Causeway Bay is a commercial district on Hong Kong Island. The camp there, which developed after authorities had blocked all access to Tamar Park on September 28, occupied high-value retail property. By contrast Mongkok, located on the Kowloon Peninsula, is known as a working-class area and creative space of up-and-coming trends (Yuen 2018). It is a multifunctional urban district comprising commercial, administrative, and civic activities, as well as housing areas and art spaces. It is the location of many civic organizations and much grassroots activism. Although the Mongkok protest site, like the Causeway Bay camp, developed spontaneously, its occupation was, nonetheless, instrumental — since it served to distract the police and to ensure the dispersal of their resources all over the city. In its effort to distract the focus of authorities from the main protest site at Admiralty, it was conceived as a spatial extension of the latter. However this spatial connection ceased after a series of attacks on the camp, both by counter-protestors and by the police. While the camps in Admiralty and Causeway Bay had faced incursions too, the degree and frequency of violence involved in the attacks on the protest camp in Mongkok were substantially higher (Yuen 2018). Finally, on October 16, the police cleared the camp, reopening the area to road traffic. That day, protestors reappropriated the site, fighting with umbrellas. Subsequently, the Mongkok camp was built up as a “militant stronghold” (Yuen 2018: 5).

The idea of military resistance was matched by the quarter's morphology. Consisting of labyrinth-like streets and with a high population density, Mongkok evolved as a strategic place of resistance, with protestors challenging established civic and nonviolent protest norms. In effect, student activists and Occupy Central organizers considered Mongkok as an unsafe place and repeatedly called upon protestors there to return to the main protest site in Admiralty (Yuen 2018). However, in Mongkok some radical factions questioned the idea of representation and leadership altogether (Liu 2017). As Yuen argues, the sense of chaos and danger actually contributed to the development of a "place-based collective identity" (2018: 5) in Mongkok. This collective identity built upon people's imaginary of the place as a grassroots community. Accordingly the Mongkok camp differed from the two other two protest sites due to its specific sense of place, and to its protest repertoires.

Protesters often invoked the image of Mongkok as a melting pot of self-styled rebels and grassroots underdogs as a cultural marker to distinguish from themselves from those in Admiralty and Causeway Bay, the two other protest sites that were considered to be more elitist and business-oriented. (Yuen 2018: 7)

The development of such a place-based identity was assisted by place-specific symbols. In Mongkok, protestors transformed a public bus into a place-specific icon. Freedom Bus No. 689 ran along fake bus stops on Nathan Road. The fictitious bus line 689 became a vehicle around which public opinion materialized. Citizens wrote their grievances and wishes onto posters and pieces of paper, fixing them on the sides of the bus. In fact, the number 689 appeared widely throughout the city and digital media. It was used as code for Chief Executive Leung, styled "Mr Leung 689." This number referred to the total votes Leung had attained from China's electoral committee in 2012, thence signifying his close support by China (Coleman 2014). As a consequence, the number 689 actually helped integrate the Freedom Bus into the movement's larger semantic network.

## **Symbols transgressing public and digital space**

The spatial dispersal of protests across the city complicated the overall organization of the movement. Consequently, the question arises whether and if so how such polycentricity in urban space was likewise mapped in digital space too. To answer this key question, this paper draws attention to the development of place-specific hashtags. These signifiers have a cataloguing or classificatory function, enabling users to follow certain threads of information. More than just assisting with information retrieval, however, hashtags may also construe experiences as well as generate relationships (Zappavigna 2015). Consequently, a hashtag can become a symbol in itself, indexing a whole movement or constituting a particular protest site. Since the first day of the protests' spatial dispersal over the city, place-specific hashtags consisting of "occupy + the name of the protest site" appeared on Facebook

and Twitter: #OccupyAdmiralty; #OccupyCausewayBay; #OccupyMongKok. On September 28, when people began assembling on the streets in Causeway Bay and in Mongkok, the hashtag #OccupyCausewayBay was used for the first time on Facebook and Twitter. Likewise the hashtag #OccupyMongKok appeared for the first time on Twitter on September 28, indexing a photo of protestors blocking Nathan Road.<sup>3</sup> The tweet was shared twelve times, and thereafter more and more tweets appeared that day employing the same hashtag. On Facebook the hashtag was used only one day later, on September 29, for the first time. It indexed a set of photos with people holding umbrellas: some of them strewn on the street, and a man lying on his back next to a hand-drawn one too.

The hashtag's frequency of appearance seems to have been closely linked to the actions that occurred in physical space. The hashtag #OccupyCausewayBay was tweeted on January 27, 2015, one month after the end of the occupation, for the last time. The hashtag #OccupyMongKok would be extensively used on Twitter until November 27, 2014. Thereafter it would only be used three times more, on the occasion of the first anniversary of the events of September 28 and October 3, 2014 (the first marking the camp's founding date, the latter the initial attack by counter-protestors). By contrast, the hashtag #OccupyCentral — which can denote both the occupied place as well as the movement as a whole — is still frequently employed by users on Twitter even today, as are the non-site-specific hashtags #occupyhk and #umbrellamovement too. Overall, the interrelationship between the actions that took place in urban public space and the evolution as well as use of place-specific hashtags indicates the mutual constitutiveness of public and digital space.

## Cross-modal icons

Apart from these place-specific symbols, others were produced and distributed in public space across the different protest sites too. In what follows, I examine those non-place-specific symbols that evolved during the first days of the protests through signifying practices in both urban and digital space. I show how tangible objects used in public space were developed into symbols, and how these were subsequently transformed into digital icons. In other words, everyday items — such as the umbrella or sticky note — were turned into digital symbols via an iconic process. Consequently, they became “cross-modal icons” (Agha 2007: 199). While Agha's (2007) primary focus is on face-to-face interaction, I suggest that cross-modal icons operate across different media platforms. As such, they are disembedded from the embodied and physical constraints of face-to-face interaction in public space. In the process of their cross-modal adoption, they changed their materiality while contributing to the emergence of a stabilized meaning for the movement. What is

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3 Actually #OccupyMongkok was first used on Twitter on February 22, 2014, and again by the same user one day later. However, both tweets were not retweeted, liked, or commented on.

more, through their digitalization, these symbols became resilient. They were still produced and circulated long after the physical protest sites had been torn down by the government, demonstrating semiotic resilience beyond the occupation of concrete urban space.

### **Yellow ribbon**

Early on, the yellow ribbon was used by protestors to express their demand for universal suffrage (Wen 2014). The history of the yellow ribbon actually dates back to the women's suffrage movement in the United States in the 1860s, and has been taken up since by many different social movements around the world. The first yellow ribbons appeared in the failed women's suffrage campaign in Kansas, in 1867. Supporters took the color from the state flower, the sunflower. Afterward, the color yellow became the official one of many suffrage organizations — including of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (Woman Suffrage Memorabilia 2015).

In recent-day Hong Kong, meanwhile, yellow ribbons were handed out on university campuses during class boycotts, at Tamar Park, and later on at other protest sites too. A young mother wore the ribbon on her baby carrier. Students wore black T-shirts with yellow ribbons, while others were tied around railings and trees bordering the government complex. As the ribbons were used in concrete space, they were also transformed into iconic signs in digital space too. Users consequently altered their Facebook and Twitter profile pictures, using therein the image of the yellow ribbon. According to Peirce (1955), the iconic sign represents its object through resemblance. The yellow ribbon worn by the protestors functioned as a symbol of the claim for universal suffrage. In digital space it was reconstructed as an icon resembling its tangible object.

Strikingly, the ribbon was also taken up by those countering the movement too. During the occupation of Central, groups of people wearing blue or green ribbons were soon to be seen in urban public space and in the media. The blue ribbon became the symbol of a pro-Beijing group formed around Leticia Lee, a controversial and pro-establishment political figure. The color blue referred to that of local police uniforms, since the group openly supported tough police action against the demonstrators (Tong 2017). The green ribbon, meanwhile, was the symbol of the group "Protect Central," founded by Junius Ho, a Hong Kong-based lawyer. In 2012 he had run for office in the Legislative Council. In an interview with CNN (October 3, 2014), he stressed the pro-democracy attitude of his group — doing so while wearing a green ribbon. Nevertheless, the group aimed to put an end to Occupy Central, advocating for dialogue between the government and the people.

## **Umbrella**

The umbrella is also an important accessory in a city where it rains throughout the monsoon season. Moreover, as in many Asian countries, the umbrella is used in Hong Kong to protect the skin against the burning sun. When the confrontation between protestors and other citizens escalated on September 28, bystanders used umbrellas to protect themselves against police tear gas and pepper spray attacks (Kurfürst 2017; Lam 2015; Richardson 2018). In the following days, the accessory gave the movement its name. The *Apple Daily* newspaper and foreign media took up this household item, coining the term “Umbrella Revolution.” The Occupy founders and the student leaders, however, rejected the term revolution, declaring that the movement’s aim was not to overthrow the government but rather to claim universal suffrage (OCLP 2015; Ng 2014).

The yellow umbrella became a symbol of the movement, used in the city’s public space. The umbrella was also taken up by artists. Canto pop singers, Anthony Wong and Denise Ho, released a song on YouTube entitled “Raise Your Umbrellas,” calling for collective action and solidarity among protestors (Tong 2017). Art installations with an umbrella theme were very common at all protest sites. In the Admiralty area, a twelve-foot-tall “Umbrella Man” made from wood blocks, holding a yellow umbrella, was created by a young artist named Milk. In Causeway Bay, rows of handmade little paper umbrellas were strung across the streets. While a group called “The Umbrella Movement Art Preservation Group” was active on the ground, collecting and preserving the movement’s art works (Forbes 2014), the umbrella, as such, achieved semiotic resilience through its transformation into a digital icon. Like the yellow ribbon, it became a cross-modal icon used across the digital interactional space of Facebook and Twitter.

## **Lennon Wall**

The Lennon Wall developed as a symbol of counterforce at the very center of state power. It was located on the walls of the Central Government Complex in Hong Kong. An analysis of its material composition reveals that it was made up of sticky notes in different colors. The wall displayed individuals’ hopes and wishes in different languages, as well paintings. It was established on October 1, when six youths started collecting people’s messages on sticky notes, then posting them on the complex’s wall (Cheng and Chan 2017; Tong 2017).

The original Lennon Wall is based in Prague. Czech students established it in the 1980s as a counterstatement to the Communist regime after a John Lennon portrait had been painted on the wall, adding in more graffiti. The Lennon Wall demonstrates the transnational scale of local demands for democracy. In November 2014, the whole Lennon Wall in Prague was painted white. All the slogans, wishes, and claims that had been expressed there over the decades were obliterated, leaving nothing but

black letters saying simply “Wall is over.” Soon thereafter, however, Prague citizens gathered and repainted the wall with slogans, among them: “TO HONG KONG FROM PRAGUE, WE SUPPORT YOU.” A painting of an umbrella completed this graffiti message (*Prague Post* 2014).

In Hong Kong itself, John Lennon’s “Imagine” was sung by protestors — while the lyrics were painted on banners and strung across buildings and bridges (Coleman 2014). In December 2014, when police put an end to the Occupy protests, the Lennon Wall was torn down. Shortly before the crackdown, citizens and artists had collected and photographed roughly 15,000 sticky notes in order to rebuild the wall both in physical as well as in digital space (Agence France Press 2014). The digital Lennon Wall of Hong Kong was rebuilt online at [lennonwall.com](http://lennonwall.com). In 2015 the website was available in both Chinese and English. While the sticky notes in real space included wishes, slogans, drawings, and the like, most of the entries on the digital wall were comprised of pictures and hashtags. One online post included the date displayed at the top, the username given with a photo, while underneath a number of hashtags were added too.

The hashtags were hyperlinks that forwarded the reader to Iconosquare. This is an analytical tool for Instagram. The only context that is offered for the images in Iconosquare is metadata consisting of hashtags, the username, and date of entry. The hashtag helps to contextualize and interpret the image presented by linking it to both past and present events. In sum, the online Lennon Wall demonstrated digital resilience beyond the occupation of real physical space, as it was still operating as of 2016. However at the time of writing the URL could no longer be accessed. On Facebook a group named “Lennon Wall Hong Kong” presents photos of the physical wall, but the last entry on this site dates from February 2015. Finally, the Lennon Wall — like Freedom Bus No. 689 in Mongkok — was a symbol physically located in the Admiralty protest site. Digitally, it was not as resilient as the yellow ribbon and the umbrella.

In sum, the yellow ribbon and umbrella offered “personal action frames” to individuals. Through such frames, people are able to identify themselves with themes that touch upon their personal lives and thence connect them to society at large (Bennett and Segerberg 2012). When police fired tear gas and pepper spray at fellow citizens, and the latter protected themselves against the attacks using umbrellas, masks, and goggles, many people living in Hong Kong were emotionally affected by the news. In reaction, they flocked to the streets in support. Castells refers to this transformation of emotion into action as “the big bang of social movements” (2012: 13). Likewise, the yellow ribbon was a symbol of the demand for universal suffrage, while at the same time expressing solidarity with fellow citizens. Personal action frames assisted in creating an emotional outburst among Hong Kong’s citizens, leading more and more people to partake in street protests and ultimately resulting in connective action.

## Connective action

Connective action begins with “the self-motivated (though not necessarily self-centered) sharing of already internalized or personalized ideas, plans, images, and resources with networks of others” (Bennett and Segerberg 2012: 753). In contrast to collective action, it does not rely on a high degree of organizational resources but rather on personalized content-sharing across media outlets. With their concept of connective action, these two authors depart from established social movement theory — which tends to stress the importance of organizations “and the resulting ways in which collective identities are forged and fractured among coalitions of those organizations and their networks” (Bennett and Segerberg 2012: 751).

Looking at the support for the various organizations involved in the Umbrella Movement, the survey by Cheng and Chan (2017) indicates that it was highly spread out. Of the interviewees, 56.5 percent identified the HKFS as the leader of the movement, while only 29 percent identified Scholarism as such; only 17.7 percent identified OCLP as the leader meanwhile. The remainder (34.7 percent) identified no leader at all.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, tensions and fractions arose among the organizations themselves. For example, the OCLP organizers stepped into the background after the official launch of the occupation on September 28. It was reported that OCLP leaders suggested clearing the protest sites, while the HKFS wanted to maintain them (Kong 2015). Subsequently, OCLP’s protagonists were marginalized by the student leaders. Its engagement was now spatially confined to the Admiralty site, and functionality to the facilitation of logistics.

On September 30, it was the HKFS that finally issued an ultimatum to the Hong Kong government demanding direct talks (Liu 2017; Tong 2017). The government declared that it would hold a meeting with representatives of the HKFS on October 10, 2014. Eventually, however, the meeting was called off by the government. On the one hand, the demand for direct negotiations with the government revealed the need for legitimate representation. On the other, protestors across different sites feared that the spontaneous movement would be “hijacked” by the organizations — although student leaders maintained the aforementioned motto of “No leaders, only the mass” (Cheng and Chan 2017: 232). Finally, in November, the legitimacy of the leadership of the protest site at Admiralty was openly questioned. Protestors marched to the main stage there carrying placards saying “you do not represent us” after they had been prevented by the marshal team from blocking access to government headquarters (Cheng and Chan 2017: 234). Others had been publicly condemned by campaign leaders for storming the Legco building that houses the Legislative Council (Liu 2017).

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4 Cheng and Chan (2017) conducted a survey with 1,681 random and valid samples at the protest sites in Admiralty, Causeway Bay, and Mongkok between October 20 and 26, 2014.



However, in spite of the movement's spatial and organizational dispersal, connective action was nevertheless still achieved in Hong Kong. The basis for such connective action was the sharing of a common political demand across the respective protest sites. Protestors in Admiralty, Causeway Bay, and Mongkok alike demanded universal suffrage from the Hong Kong government, and expressed their shared disapproval of how it reacted to the protests (see also, Yuen 2018). As a consequence they were able to share the same symbols — the ones that represented the call for universal suffrage and democratic freedom — across the different protest sites. In fact, the symbols that endured long after the protests were dissolved were not place-specific ones. What is more the symbols that circulated did not represent one of the abovementioned organizations, with only one exception: the image of Joshua Wong.

In the course of these events the image of Wong — who until then had been known only for his engagement with Scholarship — emerged as a powerful marker of identity. The emblem is linked to the person of Wong via an iconic relationship. Being an 18-year-old student at the time of the Umbrella Movement, arrested by the police, and with a history of struggling against the PRC's growing influence in Hong Kong politics and society, students could easily identify with him. His portrait was circulated widely on social media, and in diverse mediums — including drawings, photographs, paintings, and similar. His name even became a hashtag. On Twitter, his number of followers grew from 24,300 in June 2015 to 181,000 in March 2018. *TIME* magazine dedicated its October 20, 2014 issue to him, announcing that Wong was “THE FACE OF PROTEST” — with his photo appearing on the front cover.

Meanwhile, Netflix has produced a documentary about Wong too. Directed by Joe Piscatella, “Joshua: Teenager vs. Superpower” was the winner of the “The Audience Award: World Cinema Documentary” at the 2017 Sundance Film Festival, the largest independent film festival in the US. In April 2016 Wong founded together with Nathan Law (then secretary general of the HKFS), Agnes Chow, and Oscar Lai the pro-democracy party, Demosistō. Law won a seat in the 2016 Legislative Council elections, but was disqualified in early 2018 based on technicalities. Additionally, the government barred his replacement candidate, Chow, from running in the by-elections in March 2018. In August 2017 Wong was charged with instigating others to participate in an unlawful assembly of people. He was sentenced to six months in prison, but granted bail pending an appeal. In January 2018 the high court sentenced him to an additional three months in prison as he had not followed a court order to clear a protest site in the last days of the demonstrations in 2014 (Lui 2017; Wong 2018).

## Conclusion

In Hong Kong, protesting citizens adopted the transnational practice of occupying symbolic space in the city. Occupy Central differed from the other Occupy protests in 2011 in the way that it demanded political freedom from the Hong Kong government. While the mapping of the protest geographies reveals the movement's spatial polycentricity, the analysis of cross-modal icons shows that protestors, nonetheless, shared symbols across the different sites of protest. Cross-modal icons, like the yellow ribbon and the umbrella, represented the shared demand for universal suffrage and for democratic freedom.

Ultimately, the movement failed to win recognition of its demands. Nonetheless it sustainably challenged the government's performance, resulting in a political crisis in post–Occupy Central Hong Kong (Lam 2015; Richmond 2018).

The Umbrella Movement has not led to democracy, not even to direct negotiations with the Hong Kong Government nor the Chinese Communist Party, but it did establish a blueprint for an affective and civic dialogic and a reclaimed Commons within the ultra-capitalist city of Hong Kong. (Jacobs 2017: 5)

Political commons in Hong Kong were produced as people occupied symbolic urban space in the city, and simultaneously reasoned and networked in digital space too. Occupy Central is distinct from “online mass incidents” (Chen 2015: 1) in China and Taiwan in the way that action took place both in online and offline space, while it succeeded in creating a collective identity even despite the movement's spatial and organizational dispersal. Bondes and Schucher (2015) explain how even though online actions in China tend to aggregate millions of participants in a very short amount of time, they fade out quickly. By contrast, the Umbrella Movement attained (semiotic) resilience by operating and replicating symbols across different media and protest sites. The yellow umbrella is still used today by pro-democracy activists in public space and on social media. While tangible symbols in real space — like the Lennon Wall, umbrella artworks, and ribbons tied around railings — were torn down when the movement was eventually brought to an end in December 2014, digital icons are still accessible via Facebook, Twitter, and similar. Likewise, the non-site-specific hashtags #umbrellamovement and #occupyhk are still in use even today. The hashtag as a symbol links current news to past events. Citizens use it to continuously create a counter-narrative to the state one published in Hong Kong's main media outlets.

What is more, Joshua Wong's portrait developed into an icon of the Umbrella Movement — going viral well beyond the geographical borders of Hong Kong. Although imprisoned, he continues his struggle for democracy. Together with Nathan Law and Agnes Chow, Wong advocates for a referendum to determine Hong Kong's sovereignty after 2047 — when the principle of “one country, two systems,” as stipulated by the Basic Law, is supposed to expire. Future developments will

reveal whether the iconization of such leadership figures is evidence to people's longing for and appreciation of charismatic leaders (Weber 1978). Or, whether the process of iconization of leadership distributes it across a wider collective — as expressed in the movement's slogans “no leaders, only the mass” and “you do not represent us.”

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