Protesting with Text and Image: Four Publications on the 2019 Pro-democracy Movement from Hong Kong Civil Society

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Introduction

On 4 September 2019, the Hong Kong government officially announced the withdrawal of a highly contentious extradition law that had sent more than two million citizens swarming the streets in opposition. As Hong Kong participants in the 2019 Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill protests (Anti-ELAB protests for short) were having a brief moment of exhilaration, the repression had just begun. Unlike the 2014 Umbrella Movement, in which the previous government adopted the “attrition” approach (Yuen and Cheng 2017), the current government of Carrie Lam opted this time for direct suppression.

The Hong Kong authorities took highly repressive action against citizens’ freedoms of expression, of assembly, and of the press, while deliberately refusing to address the protests’ real cause. In their official publications and statements, they also disproportionately accentuated protesters’ response while playing down the police’s arbitrary violence and aggressive behaviour.1 Peaceful protests such as the 12 June sit-in


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GUARDIAN OF HONG KONG
The Disappearing Hong Kong
Lennon Walls -
Diary of Hongkongers
消失了的連儂牆 – 香港人日記
Hong Kong: Isaiah 以賽亞出版社

Voices Out of The Darkness -
Stories from the 2019 Hong Kong Protests
天愈黑 星愈亮 –
反修例運動的人和事
Hong Kong: Breakthrough 突破

Voices 納威
Hong Kong: Rock Lion.

ICH BIN EIN HONG KONGER,
Keith B. RICHBURG, and
Defiance 誰衛我城
Hong Kong: Rock Lion.
escalated into major clashes with the police firing more than 150 rounds of tear gas, a dozen bean bag rounds, and rubber bullets. In view of this distortion of events, and parallel to their active participation in street actions, many citizens decided to record this important chapter of Hong Kong history in their own words and images. A flurry of zines (Tong 2020) and journalistic (Chan 2020; Lau 2020), literary, or artistic publications (Hon 2020; The Initium 2020) were promptly released during and after the start of the 2019 Anti-ELAB movement. In this essay, four non-academic books in English and Cantonese are reviewed to highlight a few common defining features of these publications, including the circumstances under which they were published, how the 2019 protests are narrated from the perspective of ordinary protesters and observers, and how protesters keep fighting for democracy with creative means in spite of government repression. Widely advertised in activist and academic networks, these four books were selected as representing a sample of the broad range and diversity of publications, points of view, and media used to record the movement (photography, graphic design, protest art, and nonfiction narrative).

In Voices Out of The Darkness - Stories from the 2019 Hong Kong Protests (Tam 2020), Vivian Tam Wai-wan 冯慧兰 put together 80 feature stories on her venture as a special correspondent during the 2019 Anti-ELAB protests. Beside following the protests closely, Tam is also a lecturer of journalism and Communication at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, where one of the major police clashes broke out. Published by independent publisher Breakthrough 突破, Voices Out of The Darkness is not only a day-to-day field report of an independent journalist in hard hat and safety goggles, but also a profound reflection on the historicity, humanity, and deontology of journalism. The Disappearing Hong Kong Lennon Walls - Diary of Christian under the pseudonym “Guardian of Hong Kong” (Ich Bin Ein H o ng Ko nger, Richburg and Liu 2020) is edited by a devout Christian under the pseudonym “Guardian of Hong Kong” (Oiwu Hoang Gong dik jan 愛護香港的人). Published by a lesser-known unit called SCMP 出版社, the work unfolds as a personal journal, with each section starting with an inspirational quote from the Bible, followed by the author’s direct sentiments towards the injustice witnessed each day under the rule of a nonrepresentative government. It is also presented as a bulletin board of messages from Hongkongers from all walks of life, weaving individual voices into a collection of grievances and democratic demands. Finally, the small independent publisher Rock Lion released two graphic hardbacks, Defiance (Ich Bin Ein Hong Konger, Richburg and Liu 2020) and Voices (Abaddon 2020). Defiance is a photographic documentary of Hong Kong protesters shedding tears and blood on the unrecognisable streets throughout the year of 2019, both artistic and authentic. Voices, on the other hand, is a collection of hundreds of pro-democracy graphic designs that were plastered on the city’s walls, bringing out the creativity and witness of Hong Kong protesters. Childe Abaddon, the editor of Voices, is himself a prolific protest artist in the Anti-ELAB protests, and unless unnamed, some of the 60 Defiance photographers are major contributors to international and local news outlets, while its editors are renowned journalists Keith Richburg and Liu Kin-ming 刘建明. The four publications are distributed online and in selected independent bookstores, reaching out to a broad Cantonese and English-speaking readership (Defiance and Voices are written in both languages). Although a few scholars have promptly worked on a chronology of the 2019 protests (Dapiran 2020; Wasserstrom 2020), these four titles should not be underestimated for their historical value and their contribution to understanding Hong Kong’s pro-democracy movements.

Recent challenges for Hong Kong publishers
Once renowned for its free environment and thriving publishing industry, Hong Kong has recently faced major challenges in this sector, in particular in 2015, when five staff members of Causeway Bay Books were kidnapped and tried in mainland China. According to the Hong Kong Basic Law, “Hong Kong residents shall have freedom of speech, of the press and of publication; freedom of association, of assembly, of procession and of demonstration; and the right and freedom to form and join trade unions, and to strike.” Nevertheless, these freedoms are no longer guaranteed since the implementation of the National Security Law (NSL) on 30 June 2020, as it overrides the Basic Law and broadly aims at suppressing any possible threat to national security. Although the NSL includes reassurances that Hong Kong citizens’ freedoms of press and publication are still under the protection of the Basic Law, publishing pro-democracy content may now result in charges of subversion, sedition, terrorism, and colluding with foreign forces.

Soon after the promulgation of the NSL, the Hong Kong government adopted draconian measures to silence dissidents and “promoters” of pro-democracy messages, pressing on with the erasure of pro-democracy titles from public libraries and the city’s largest annual book fair. As a result, some publishers have started to self-censor, and during the course of writing this review, the website for Defiance and Voices was no longer publicly accessible.

At the same time, the existence of independent bookstores and publishers is threatened by the monopoly of Chinese-funded companies. Sino United Publishing Group 聯合出版 (集團)有限公司, the parent of three major Hong Kong publishing groups (Joint Publishing 三聯書店, Commercial Press 商務印書館, and Chung Hwa 中華書局), is in fact fully controlled by officials of the PRC Central Government Liaison Office, who also own Hong Kong’s biggest pro-Beijing newspapers, Ta Kung Pao and Wen Wei Po.


The three major publishing groups have dozens of franchises all over Hong Kong and own more than a half of all local bookstores. They produce and sell a vast selection of books, including textbooks, posing a grave danger to freedom of expression and free access to knowledge in Hong Kong. Due to the unhealthy dominance of state-owned commercial publishing houses and the NSL, concerned publishers have gradually migrated their vending points to online platforms, and distribute only in selected independent physical bookshops – which was the case for the four reviewed books.

**Documenting Hong Kong people’s history**

Like other titles, these recent publications on Hong Kong protest movements denote an effort to document ordinary people’s history of political and social engagements. People’s history, or “history from below,” is a historical narrative genre focusing principally on the oppressed, the powerless, and the marginalised, in contrast to political history, which concentrates mainly on people in power (Chesnæaux 1976; Thompson 1966; Zinn 1990; Bhattacharya 1986: 4-5). In a strict sense, *Voices Out of The Darkness, The Disappearing Hong Kong Lennon Walls, Defiance*, and *Voices* do not fall neatly into the category of people’s history. However, they chronicle events from a perspective of ordinary protesters and observers, providing a different side of history from academic works, the narratives from pro-government newspapers, and official reports. These documentation of how the 2019 protests were lived and perceived by ordinary protesters and observers constitute invaluable primary sources for history writing, whether in text or image, and could contribute substantially to future academic works.

As a long-time journalist who has received recognition from her readers and peers, Vivian Tam Wai-wan recounts her personal experience while reporting the Anti-ELAB protests in her latest book. *Voices Out of The Darkness* manifests her sophistication in human depiction. Her writing style is distinctly influenced by feature story writing, which focuses largely on the individual instead of the event. Whereas many feature stories require adequate studies on the person of interest, subjects penned in Tam’s latest book are oftentimes merely strangers and ordinary people. She lends an ear to the faintest voices in the loudest chants of pro-democracy slogans, attempting to draw readers’ attention to the grievances of the Anti-ELAB protesters: students, civil servants, taxi drivers, housewives, foreign domestic helpers, and so on. From an underage girl’s tears during her first arrest (p. 127-32) to an old popsicle vendor’s nonchalant response to tear gas (p. 435-39), every voice tells a different story, and every story counts. The author reports in an exceptionally calm manner, even when stuck in the violent clash between riot police and university students at her alma mater on 11 November 2019 (p. 355-63). *Voices Out of The Darkness* proposes an extensive inspection on the social context of the population of Hong Kong in the recent political turmoil, allowing for a better understanding of Hong Kong protesters’ demands.

*Defiance, or Who Protects Our City? (Seoi wai ngo sing 誰衛我城)* in literal translation, is a work of photojournalism documenting major events in the 2019 protests in both Cantonese and English, corroborated with a wide range of photographs of street protests in thick tear gas. Some images capture the lack of professionalism of the Hong Kong Police Force (HKPF) in handling the Anti-ELAB protests, contradicting their claims of being restrained and always using appropriate force,11 for instance, when an anti-riot police officer strikes his baton on a detained protester’s head (p. 80), when a police officer aims a canister of pepper spray directly at the face of peaceful civilians who were video-recording him (p. 82-3), or when another officer armed with a crowd-control rifle provokes protesters from a distance with hand gestures (p. 87). Another case in point is that well-illustrated in the book is the HKPF’s handling of the Yuen Long 21 July 2019 mob attack.12

While the authorities claimed that the HKPF did not notice any irregular activities that might have led to the violent clash that night, photo evidence in the book shows police conversing with mobsters in white T-shirts holding bamboo rods prior to the incident (p. 141), corroborating allegations of police-mob collusion.13

While *The Disappearing Hong Kong Lennon Walls* may appear to be less polished in comparison with the previous two titles, it presents the narratives and opinions of ordinary protesters and the civil society throughout 2019. In this publication with a strong focus on woleifei (和理非, peaceful, “rational,” and non-violent protesters), the editor celebrates a popular mode of collective political expression and creativity in Hong Kong since 2014. The first Hong Kong Lennon Wall emerged in the middle of the Umbrella Movement, taking form as a hybrid of the original John Lennon Wall in Prague, and the Democracy Wall (*Minzhu Qiang 民主牆*) of post-Cultural Revolution China (1978-1979). In early October 2014, protesters started putting up Post-it notes written with supportive messages on a wall around the Central Government Offices in Admiralty, on Hong Kong Island. This practice gradually became popular, attracting people outside of the occupied area to come and participate with their own notes. Spreading out several meters in length, the notes composed a colourful wall of wishes for authentic universal suffrage. In 2019, a second generation of Hong Kong Lennon Walls, in plural, took over every possible corner of the city: tunnels, footbridges, bus stops, and walls outside of
shopping malls. They were not only covered by messages in colourful square paper like five years before, but also by all sorts of graphic posters on A4 size paper, sometimes as large as a billboard. The Hong Kong Lennon Walls soon became highly contentious spaces between protesters and counter-protesters, and underwent regular removal by the authorities. In this publication, the author mourns the demolished Hong Kong Lennon Walls and invites pro-democracy protesters to their restoration by co-authoring the book. Contributors to Lennon Walls may come from the grassroots or from the civil society, all showing their support for the pro-democracy movement. Civil society has long been an active participant in Hong Kong’s social movements (Loh 2007; Wong and Chan 2017), and more than 70 pro-democracy labour unions were formed by January 2020 in the hope of influencing the upcoming Chief Executive election. Religious groups were also visible on protests sites, especially at the beginning of the movement, when pacifist Christians joined by non-religious citizens stood in front of armed police singing “Sing Hallelujah to the Lord” for hours to defuse tension and protect protesters. As a person of faith, the author receives enthusiastic responses from religious people in his book, as well as other members of civil society, such as labour union representatives and social workers.

**Creativity in times of protest: From murals to messaging applications**

As the Hong Kong government on 4 October 2019 invoked the colonial era’s Emergency Regulations Ordinance to prohibit protesters from wearing masks during unauthorised assembly, in addition to the police ban on mass protest events, Hong Kong protesters have been pressured to dissent in less visible yet more creative ways than street rallies, such as engaging in Lennon Wall decoration. Lennon Walls provide protesters with a platform to voice their discontent, and also to connect with likeminded Hongkongers. Both The Disappearing Hong Kong Lennon Walls and Voices have archived a significant collection of creative posters from pro-democracy protests. In Lennon Walls, you may find a Christmas tree made of Post-it messages (p. 25), government officials’ photos and their “crimes” printed on poker game cards (p. 209), and a series of drawings of *jungmou* (勇武, radical protesters) as anime characters (p. 159).

In Voices, Hong Kong protesters have not only created derivative works of globally renowned paintings, such as Delacroix’s *Liberty Leading the People* (p. 132-3) and Magritte’s *Galoota* (p. 181), but also artworks that reflect Hong Kong’s local culture, such as ghost money depicting government officials in costume and makeup (p. 154-55), protest slang illustrations with Cantonese, Jyutping, and English annotations (p. 220-21), calligraphy (p. 232-3), and computer typefaces (p. 230-1; 234-5). In terms of content, these artworks can be sorted into five major categories: supportive messages, slogans, protest events calendars, concise summaries to debunk misinformation, and protest art. Hong Kong Lennon Walls have progressively morphed from an emotional support station into a terrain of resistance.

**Negotiating free speech and safety: Anonymity, pseudonyms, and collective expression**

Mask-wearing has become a common practice for Hong Kong protesters as a result of their insecurity over increasing surveillance in the digital age, which is sometimes juxtaposed with the CCP’s intrusive policing systems in Xinjiang.尤为重要的是，香港抗议者在日益严峻的安全环境下，通常会采用统一的装扮（黑色衣物和面罩），以避免被识别。值得注意的是，这四本书中有三本是匿名作者，除了书的作者和出版者采用匿名方式外，部分贡献者的身份也被隐瞒，使用了多个化名。这反映了香港市民对当局大规模逮捕和诉讼的恐惧，以及“网络暴力”文化在互联网上日益严重。在《消失的香港 Lennon 墙》中，作者可以分为三类：公众人物以真名出现（例如占中发起人 Benny Tai Yiu-ting, 邹恩泉, p. 184-5），大学教授Bruce Lui Ping-kuen (p. 258-60)，作家使用粤语或英语化名（如 Richard, p. 47-9, 陈展恩, p. 284），以及匿名的作者。随着可识别度的降低，他们披露个人信息和抗议经历的频率有所增加。例如，“Polar bear 妈妈,” 有两名儿童，详细记录她在对抗6月12日抗议（p. 88-9）；“Kagura” 揭露他/她的痛苦，因为她/他是警军的孩子（p. 144-5）；“Bou Lo 保羅”表达了他/她的内疚感，因为未能保护他的同年抗议者（p. 232-3）。所有这些匿名故事允许读者以一种更为细致入微的方式了解日常的日常生活和思想，如果没有匿名性，这些证据可能不存在，因为任何抗议者都可能成为《国家安全法》的牺牲品。


Left: Don’t Give In. Credit: Jeffrey Kit Quang, Voices, p. 81; Right: Credit: Childe Abaddon. Voices, p. 113.
received requests from interviewees to leave their real names out of her articles (p. 42). She refers to Tom Grundy’s24 editorial decision to not blur a protester’s face during the LegCo occupation on the night of 1 July 2019, defying hundreds of requests from netizens (p. 46).

On the other hand, anonymity provides those who cannot openly attend street protests a sense of safety in creating protest art. Voices has collected not only artworks of popular local cartoonists such as Ah To and Cuson Lo (p. 195) but also drawings by anonymous contributors. Anonymity facilitates the free circulation of these works online, through messaging applications, or simply on Lennon Walls. The flourishing of anonymous protest art on Lennon Walls has encouraged protesters to create their own materials and quickly replenish them with newly-designed posters as soon as they were removed by government-appointed cleaners or vandalised by pro-Beijing gangs.

**Conclusion**

The momentum of the current pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong was significantly hindered throughout 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic and the implementation of the Hong Kong National Security Law have effectively paralysed all large-scale protests. It is unclear whether mass rallies and assemblies will resume once the pandemic is under control. Meanwhile, the Court of Final Appeal has recently ruled that the Hong Kong mask ban will be upheld constitutionally in unlawful assemblies,25 which is a victory for the government and a serious blow to Hong Kong protesters who have been repeatedly denied permission to attend lawful demonstrations. In the face of incessant mass arrests and prosecutions in the name of national security, there is very little room for civil disobedience. Voices Out of The Darkness, The Disappearing Hong Kong Lennon Walls, Defiance, and Voices summarise the events of the 2019 protests in text and image, giving prominence to the diversity of participants and the creative protest methods they utilise in daily resistance, including publishing protest-themed books as a form of resistance. These publications also raise awareness about the difficulties of being a pro-democracy protester in Hong Kong and how these individuals come together, often in anonymity, forming collective actions that delineate a people’s history.

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24. Co-founder and editor-in-chief of Hong Kong Free Press, a non-profit, Hong Kong-based English-speaking newspaper.

**References**


