

2020

## The Life and Death of a Protest Anthem at the Frontier of a New Cold War

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### Recommended Citation

Leung, Janny HC, The Life and Death of a Protest Anthem at the Frontier of a New Cold War, *Law Text Culture*, 24, 2020, 191-226.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/ltc/vol24/iss1/11>

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### Abstract

Amidst the rise of a new Cold War between China and the US, Hong Kong has been called Ground Zero, the new Berlin, or the Global Frontier by various media outlets. During an ongoing US-China trade war, the Water Movement broke out in 2019. It was the largest and most prolonged social movement that Hong Kong has seen, and one that was met with the direst consequence – the imposition of a sweeping National Security Law that has changed the political landscape of Hong Kong. Soon after the social movement erupted, the song Glory to Hong Kong gained huge popularity and came to be known unofficially as the ‘national anthem’ of Hong Kong. It has been sung regularly at protests, with many language versions being circulated on YouTube. Taking a social semiotic approach, this paper interprets the meaning of this protest anthem, teasing out its multimodal layers and analysing its production, lyrics, musical form, digital renditions, and live performances in light of the evolving socio-political situation at the time. The analysis suggests that certain renditions of the song expressed not only political defiance but also a budding national imagination as a route of redressing injustice, as disappointment in rule of law grew; however, ideological cohesion among movement participants remained limited. Although the National Security Law has successfully quenched such political expressions, confidence in the rule of law has to be restored in order to provide a much-needed pressure valve for Hong Kong.

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**Janny HC Leung**

Amidst the rise of a new Cold War between China and the US, Hong Kong has been called Ground Zero, the new Berlin, or the Global Frontier by various media outlets. During an ongoing US-China trade war, the Water Movement broke out in 2019. It was the largest and most prolonged social movement that Hong Kong has seen, and one that was met with the direst consequence – the imposition of a sweeping National Security Law that has changed the political landscape of Hong Kong. Soon after the social movement erupted, the song *Glory to Hong Kong* gained huge popularity and came to be known unofficially as the ‘national anthem’ of Hong Kong. It has been sung regularly at protests, with many language versions being circulated on YouTube. Taking a social semiotic approach, this paper interprets the meaning of this protest anthem, teasing out its multimodal layers and analysing its production, lyrics, musical form, digital renditions, and live performances in light of the evolving socio-political situation at the time. The analysis suggests that certain renditions of the song expressed not only political defiance but also a budding national imagination as a route of redressing injustice, as disappointment in rule of law grew; however, ideological cohesion among movement participants remained limited. Although the National Security Law has successfully quenched such political expressions, confidence in the rule of law has to be restored in order to provide a much-needed pressure valve for Hong Kong.

## **Social Movement and Law Through the Lens of Music**

Social movements as a political form began in Western Europe and North America in the late eighteenth century as a means of collective claim-making against target authorities. Tilly and Wood's historical research (2009) shows that social movements broadly corresponded with democratization. For more than two centuries, social movements flourished during democratization, and receded when authoritarian regimes curtailed democratic rights. Democratization promotes social movements by establishing rights to assemble, associate, and to speak collectively. It also underpins the relationship between government and its people by affirming the principle of popular sovereignty; opportunities in participatory decision-making, such as the right to vote and to serve on jury, therefore also encourage social movement.

According to the resource mobilisation theory (Jenkins 1983), the success of social movements depends on resources (including material and symbolic resources) being available to them. Law may be considered a critical resource – legal protection of civil liberties can facilitate or restrain social movements. Rights discourse can also confer legitimacy to a movement and constitute an important symbolic resource (Chen 2017).

Three core components define social movements: campaigns (referring to sustained public effort in claim-making), repertoires (referring to political actions), and WUNC (which stands for worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment) displays (Tilly and Wood 2009). Along with public meetings, street marches, press releases, and slogan-chanting, singing is a common repertoire of claim-making performances. Songs and rituals enrich a movement's culture, enhance the pleasure of participation, and help participants cope with their fears. They are examples of encouragement mechanisms that often help sustain a movement (Goodwin and Pfaff 2001).

Viewed more broadly, social movements can be conceptualized not only as political but also cultural activities, for they often redefine, reinterpret and ascribe new meaning to cultural traditions. Popular music infuses powerful ideas from movements of the time and becomes

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a spiritual link between generations of activists (Eyerman and Jamison 1998). Even after the movements fade in the political scene, “the music remains as a memory and as a potential way to inspire new waves of mobilization” (ibid: 2).

This article examines the interrelation between social movement and law through interpreting the song *Glory to Hong Kong*, which was the protest anthem during what has become known as the Water Movement in Hong Kong. The Water Movement, which erupted in opposition to a bill that would allow criminal suspects to be extradited from Hong Kong to mainland China, was not unlike other social movements. Like many other recent protests around the world, the movement was decentralized and had a loose organisational structure; it was mobilised and heavily mediated through the use of social media and other modern communication technologies. It has all the three core components of a social movement that Tilly and Wood describe.

There are however good reasons why the Water Movement, and its lingering legal and political aftermath, deserves special attention in the global political landscape today. Not only was the Water Movement the largest and most prolonged social movement that Hong Kong has seen, it was met with the direst of consequences – the imposition of a sweeping National Security Law that significantly curtails civil liberties (Clift 2020). The timing of its eruption – in the middle of an ongoing US-China trade war – was also highly significant. Amidst the rise of a new Cold War between China and the US, Hong Kong has been called Ground Zero, the new Berlin, or the Global Frontier by various media outlets (Fong 2020; Lee 2020; Wasserstrom 2020). What might normally be considered internal politics to a city of 7.5 million people has come to feature in major diplomatic rows. The United Kingdom has criticised China for breaching their treaty agreement by curtailing the autonomy, rights and freedoms in the former colony (Savage 2021). The Five Eyes intelligence alliance, consisting of United States, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom, has vowed to protect Hong Kong as a bastion of freedom (Rej 2020). The US has sanctioned Hong Kong and Chinese officials for undermining

Hong Kong's autonomy and for suppressing political opposition in the legislature (Delaney 2020), and China has responded by imposing retaliatory sanctions (Sevastopulo and Riordan 2021).

It is productive to examine the relationship between social movement and law through the lens of a protest anthem, not only because the song encapsulates the shared emotions and collective identity among participants of the movement, but also because it resonates with people of a wide political spectrum and momentarily unifies them. Moreover, the song's continued political sensitivity and the censorship it has drawn illuminate the rapid closure of space for social movements in Hong Kong today.

This paper will interpret the song by analysing how semiotic resources are deployed in its creation, renditions and performances, and how they may be interpreted in the socio-political context. Section 2 details the history of social movements in post-handover Hong Kong and highlights salient features of the Water Movement, providing relevant socio-political background and setting the stage for the analysis that follows. Section 3 offers a multimodal, and socially and legally situated analysis of *Glory to Hong Kong*, covering the song's creative process, lyrics, musical elements, digital mediation, and performances, analysing how different semiotic resources are deployed and combined to create meaning. The section ends with an examination of the legal aftermath of the movement through the lens of the song. The final section concludes the paper by contemplating challenges and opportunities, and using Hong Kong as an illustrative case of how law can enable and disable social movements.

### **Chinese Nationalism and Political Resistance in Post-Handover Hong Kong**

Although political representation and legal equality were limited during most of the colonial period in British Hong Kong (1841-1997), social reforms in the early 1970s asserted the colonial government as a protector of local interests (from education, housing, to anti-corruption) (Ng and Wong 2017). Political reforms in the 1980s and 1990s have led

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to partial democratization of the legislature and local administration, successfully absorbing many social activists into electoral politics (Chen 2017). The prospect of reunification with China, a fate sealed by the Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984, and the Tiananmen massacre in 1989 led to a legal awakening, making many Hong Kong people realize that the rule of law and the protection of individual rights are important treasures that differentiate Hong Kong from mainland China. After the United Kingdom handed Hong Kong over to China on 1 July 1997, although the city – as a Special Administration Region under the One Country, Two Systems model – still enjoys many more rights and freedoms than their mainland counterparts, ideologies and practices in the two systems frequently clashed, as local interests were subsumed into and undermined by national interests, and the meaning of rule of law was gradually transposed into law and order. Peaceful protests occurred regularly and increasingly frequently (for example, 6818 legal processions occurred in 2014 alone, compared with an average of 2200 public meetings a year between 1997 and 2007, see figures cited in Chen 2017) until 2020. Despite their frequency, these protests may be considered a testimony of political freedom enjoyed in Hong Kong and of the health of One Country, Two Systems.

As will become evident below, most of the largest protests in post-handover Hong Kong were triggered by public opposition to proposed changes in law. The first massive protest in post-handover Hong Kong broke out in 2003, when a proposed national security law (National Security (Legislative Provisions) Bill 2003), the introduction of which is meant to satisfy Article 23 of the Basic Law, drove half a million people onto the street on 1 July. The government shelved the bill in response, with the anticipation that it will be reintroduced when the timing is right.<sup>1</sup> Ever since, a regular protest happened annually and ritualistically on the handover anniversary, focusing on social and political issues pertinent at the time (Lee and Chan 2011).

The localist turn in Hong Kong's social movements happened around 2006 and 2007, when young activists protested to protect the Star Ferry Terminal and Queen's Pier from demolition, in the name

of preserving local heritage and identity (Chen 2017). This localist movement gained further momentum when activists campaigned in 2009 to oppose the government's construction of a high-speed railway connecting Hong Kong with mainland China, which required the demolition of local farmland. Longitudinal survey of ethnic identity shows that since late 2000s, a local Hong Kong identity surged against a diminishing sense of national identity (Steinhardt et al. 2018).

In 2012, a government plan to introduce national education into the school curriculum was ridden with controversy about the partiality of the teaching materials, drawing thousands of uniformed high schoolers (including the then 14-year old activist Joshua Wong) to rally outside government headquarters and chanting out loud their refusal to be brainwashed.<sup>2</sup>

Two years later, in 2014, a proposed electoral reform – which was to deliver China's promise of 'democracy' to Hong Kong by allowing the central government to prescreen the candidates for Chief Executive before letting people vote on two or three of them – led to a 79-day Occupy movement that demanded genuine universal suffrage.<sup>3</sup> The protest is also known as the Umbrella Movement – referring to the use of umbrellas as protection against the police's use of tear gas and batons, symbolising the unequal physical power between protestors and law enforcers and the peacefulness of the protestors. Two years later, the first 'riot' Hong Kong had seen in decades happened when localist groups rallied to shield street hawkers from government crackdown in Mong Kok (an incident sometimes called the Fishball Revolution), clashing physically with the police.

A dramatic incident in 2015-2016 provides an important context to understanding the 2019 movement which is the focus of discussion in this paper. Thanks to the freedom of speech enshrined in Article 16 of the Hong Kong Bill of Rights Ordinance, Hong Kong (and Macau to a lesser extent) is the only place in China where one can legally protest on the street and print dissident literature. Five booksellers, all connected with one dissident bookstore in Hong Kong, disappeared one by one within the territory of Hong Kong and Thailand, with there being no

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immigration record of them exiting the territory, and reappeared in mainland China confessing to various crimes on national television (Leung 2017). This incident struck a nerve in Hong Kong, provoking fear that the freedoms guaranteed by One Country, Two Systems may be quickly eroding (*The Wall Street Journal* January 6 2016).

Fast-forward to 2019. Chan Tong-kai murdered his pregnant girlfriend Poon Hui-wing, when the two Hong Kong residents vacationed in Taiwan. Chan returned to Hong Kong, evading murder charges because he committed the crime outside of Hong Kong's jurisdiction. Hong Kong has entered into extradition treaties with 20 countries, but it has none with Taiwan or with mainland China (Chen 2019).<sup>4</sup> Although the case in hand only concerned Taiwan, the authorities in Hong Kong moved to pass a bill that would allow for the extradition of criminals not only to Taiwan but also to the mainland China.<sup>5</sup> In response, the Taiwan Mainland Affairs Council warned that it could issue a travel warning for Hong Kong if this law was passed, as it would allow Taiwanese residents to be extradited from Hong Kong to the mainland; the Taiwan government also announced that it would not accept the extradition of Chan under this law (Purbrick 2019). Meanwhile, the legal community in Hong Kong was concerned that insufficient human rights safeguards were built into the proposed bill: for instance, the requesting jurisdiction would not be required to comply with conditions such as guaranteeing the right to a fair trial, and the bill gave Hong Kong courts no power to assess whether extradition complied with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (or similar rights instruments) (Chan 2019). Moreover, it is unlikely that the Chief Executive of Hong Kong would effectively play the role of a gatekeeper as s/he is accountable to the Central Government (Chen 2019).

The prevailing fear was that Hong Kong people who broke no law in Hong Kong, if suspected of breaking laws in China, could then be legally transferred to the mainland for interrogation and prosecution. Since currently most laws in China do not apply to Hong Kong, the extradition bill could introduce a legal muddle that chills freedoms

enjoyed in Hong Kong. The horror experienced by the booksellers would no longer be an isolated incident.

The massive and prolonged movement against the extradition bill has engendered some of the most violent clashes in the history of protest in Hong Kong. The movement started in early 2019, gained momentum in June 2019, and persisted through the rest of the year. It only dwindled following the coronavirus outbreak in early 2020, and was stamped out by the National Security Law when it was passed on 30 June 2020. These months of unrest saw a record-breaking march attended by two million people (more than a quarter of the population), multiple general strikes, countless physical clashes between the protesters and the riot police, schools suspended, public transport halted, university campuses under siege, and more than 10,000 arrests. Critically, the protest persisted, and in fact continued to escalate, even after the Chief Executive formally withdrew the proposed bill in September 2019. Apart from demanding universal suffrage, which is the ultimate goal, protesters also sought to exonerate thousands of arrestees, to remove the characterisation of the unrest as a riot, and to establish an independent commission of inquiry into police conduct and use of force. In other words, four out of the five demands had to do with the government's heavy-handed approach to the movement itself.

There are many reasons why the 2019 protest will be remembered as a watershed, the most notable of which being its legal aftermath. Why was the Water Movement so unnerving to Beijing that it rushed to pass the National Security Law? A few salient features of the Movement will be highlighted here.

The most significant aspect of the Water Movement is the radicalization of claims and tactics. The term radicalization here refers to the adoption of ideologies and strategies that depart from existing norms, and are not necessarily morally questionable (see Beach 1977, also Lee and Chan 2011). Radicalization of the mainstream requires discursive work – a new framing that redefines a situation and articulates the necessity of escalation, in order to promote the legitimacy, feasibility and effectiveness of new protest directions (Lee

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and Chan 2018).

As reviewed above, major protests in post-handover Hong Kong were triggered by the denial or restriction of freedom, often through the violence of law. Regardless of the original trigger, the protest discourse kept returning to the failed promise of democracy (Fu 2020). Gradually, protestors started making claims against the Central government rather than the Hong Kong government (Garret 2015), which reflects the perceived erosion of the One Country, Two Systems governing model. In earlier protests, the anger that protestors felt was mostly directed towards top officials in Hong Kong (most noticeably past Chief Executives Tung Chee-Hwa, Donald Tsang, and Leung Chun-Ying; past Chief Security of Secretary Regina Ip who was responsible for Article 23). By 2019, even though there was no shortage of anger expressed at the current Chief Executive Carrie Lam, the protest was filled with visible symbols of resistance against the Communist Party. For more than a decade, Hong Kong citizens had fully recognized the Chinese government instead of the Hong Kong government as the ultimate obstacle to democratization (Lee and Chan 2011). The resistance against fuller integration with mainland China had driven the radicalization of claims. While the majority of protestors strived for democracy, there were factions of protestors who started making claims about Hong Kong independence. This arose from the continued growth of a Hong Kong identity and a localist interest, which took root during earlier waves of protest.<sup>6</sup> As Fu (2020) observes, political dissidents and successionists are not natural allies because they often have conflicting goals. Older activists in Hong Kong are mostly Chinese patriots who hope to bring democracy to both China and Hong Kong; they supported the democracy movement in China in 1989 and pray for a democratic China every year at the June 4 vigil in Hong Kong. Their aspiration does not resonate with many young people, who are more locally oriented.

The radicalization of claims had been accompanied by the radicalization of tactics. Ho (2000) classifies resistance tactics into four types: orderly politics (i.e., what happens within political

institutions), polite politics (i.e., claims-making that happens outside the political structure but does not disrupt social routines and political structures), protests (such as strikes and illegal occupation, which are disruptive), and violence (i.e., actions that cause physical damage). With a few notable exceptions, social movements in Hong Kong have predominantly taken the form of polite politics, with tens of thousands of people frequently taking to the street but leaving no damage to property after they disperse (Dearden 2014a & 2014b). The idea of Occupying Central, as proposed in 2013 by two academics and a reverend, represented a radicalization of the moderates (Lee and Chan 2018). Occupying streets marks a milestone because it is disruptive, involving breaking the law in the form of civil disobedience. Despite its disruption, the Umbrella Movement was known for its civility, with protestors cleaning up the streets, recycling waste, producing art, and educating the public at the Occupy sites. Young participants felt empowered by the movement, although they also regretted not having further escalated their tactic, believing that remaining peaceful was why the movement failed (Ho and Hung 2020). The 2019 protest presented an opportunity for redemption. It started in the realm of polite politics – with big crowds marching from one point to another, but soon even peaceful protests were met with unprecedented police brutality (*Amnesty International* September 19 2019) involving the use of live ammunition, tear gas, water cannons containing undisclosed chemical irritants, plastic bullets, pepper balls, sponge grenades, and bean bags. Protestors also stepped up, donning gas masks, helmets, and protective eyewear, after a high school teacher was shot in the eye with a police projectile. A notable discursive shift, accompanied with a new level of anger, happened after a group of thugs attacked protestors and other civilians at a subway station in Yuen Long on 21 July 2019, seemingly with the cooperation of the police force. The footage and images that then circulated in digital media platforms shocked the moderates. The lack of an effective mechanism to keep police power in check led to more widespread acceptance and gradual normalization of the use of force during the movement. More radical protest tactics had been deployed, which included storming into the Legislative

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Council Complex, damaging traffic lights and public transit facilities, throwing Molotov cocktails, and damaging shops that are associated with mainland China (Ho and Hung 2020).

Apart from the radicalization of claims and tactics, the Water Movement was also difficult to crush because of its fluidity in form and organisation. The name of the movement is inspired by Bruce Lee's famous quote: 'Be formless, shapeless — like water. Water can flow or it can crash. Be water, my friend.' (Zhou and Wong 2019) It was coordinated through discussion on digital platforms such as the reddit-like forum LIHKG and encrypted communication tools such as Telegram. Although a leaderless movement can be challenging because of vulnerability to factioning and infiltration, anonymity provides some protection. Anonymity was a particularly important protest tactic in the Water Movement because many recognisable faces of the Umbrella Movement had been jailed for archaic crimes such as conspiracy or incitement to commit public nuisance, and incitement to incite public nuisance (*The Guardian* April 9 2019). A leaderless movement does not easily lose its momentum after some protesters are arrested. Distributed leadership is not unique to the Water Movement – it is but one example of a global rise in networked social movements in the digital era (Western 2014, see also Castells 2015). The Water Movement was fluid in form as well as organisation. Instead of marching on a determined route or Occupying a fixed area, protesters showed up, protested, and dispersed. Since protesters had limited ability to physically clash with the police force, making their protest activity unpredictable was also one way of protecting themselves. This strategy, which is the anti-thesis of Occupy, has since cross-fertilized transnationally in recent protests in Belarus and Thailand in 2020. One downside of decentralization, however, is that a leaderless movement cannot effectively negotiate with the government when the opportunity comes, making escalation difficult to avoid.

Finally, the Water Movement was particularly active in external mobilisation, leveraging the city's status as an international financial hub and as a former colony. Using crowdsourced creativity and

technological savviness, many of the protest events were a spectacle well suited for media dissemination (what Delicath and Deluca 2003 called image events): from colourful Lennon Walls that ‘blossomed’ everywhere, to a 3D-printed four-metre statue of Lady Liberty erected on top of the Lion Rock mountain in Kowloon, or the formation of a human chain with more than 200,000 people in imitation of the Baltic Way.<sup>7</sup> Since most local media companies are seen to have lost their journalist neutrality after being acquired by mainland Chinese owners (see Lee and Chan 2018), activists turned their attention to digital and global media. Protesters crowdfunded over HKD5 million dollars – within hours – to place advertisements in international newspapers ahead of the G20 summit to put pressure on global leaders to speak up for Hong Kong. A delegation of protesting students visited different countries and urged politicians to pledge their support, speaking at the UK parliament and lobbying the US to pass the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act (*Hong Kong Watch* September 9 2019, *ABC News* September 3 2019). The global resonance that the movement created benefited immensely from its timing – when a new Cold War rhetoric was being constructed, portraying a totalitarian China absorbing and corrupting a free and democratic West. The global outlook of the movement and its attempt at citizen diplomacy were unmistakable, suggesting that the protesters might have given up on all hopes that their government would listen to its people short of external pressure. This kind of external pressure, amidst US-China tensions and international attention on China’s mass detention of Uyghurs, had challenged Beijing’s patience with Hong Kong.

### **The Political Soundtracks of Hong Kong**

Music has always been a means of political expression, both by the powerful and the powerless. It can be used to foster collective identity (Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta 2001), based not only on shared ideology but also emotional experiences. Such ideology and emotional experiences however cannot be directly mapped onto formal features of music. Decades of research suggests that emotional responses to

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music rarely come from decontextualized, structural aesthetic features but complex interactions between the music, the listener, and the situation (Sloboda and Juslin 2010). Taking a social semiotic approach, this section analyses the song *Glory to Hong Kong* against the wider political soundscape.

### **A Chinese National Anthem in Hong Kong**

Concerned that Hong Kong has become a hub of dissent, China has made it a mission to instil a sense of nationalism in Hong Kong, albeit with limited success.<sup>8</sup> Apart from an unsuccessful introduction of a national education curriculum in 2012, there have been ongoing attempts in naturalising national symbols in everyday life, through promoting flag-raising ceremonies and the use of Mandarin in public schools, or broadcasting an acoustic version of the national anthem on television just before the daily news.<sup>9</sup>

In light of the gradual loss of freedom that Hong Kong people have experienced, Chinese national symbols are viewed by some as a reminder of political oppression and a centralized effort to drown Hong Kong identity. After the Umbrella Movement in 2014, the Chinese national anthem was frequently booed when played during football matches in Hong Kong (Carrico 2019, Yu 2018).<sup>10</sup> On 1 October 2017, the NPC passed a National Anthem Law that punishes people who altered or insulted '*The March of the Volunteers*' on the mainland. Soon after its passage in Mainland China, the NPC inserted it into the Annex III of the Basic Law on 4 November 2017, requiring the HKSAR to apply it 'locally by way of promulgation or legislation' under Article 18. The national anthem bill was tabled in early 2019 but its passage was delayed during the Water Movement. It was eventually passed in June 2020.

### **B *Glory to Hong Kong* as a Protest Anthem**

Music has consistently been a language of social movement in Hong Kong. Held annually in the Victoria Park in Hong Kong, a candle-lit vigil commemorating the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre has its

own soundtrack that carries the grief of thousands of attendees.<sup>11</sup> In post-handover Hong Kong, the most popular protest song is *Under the Vast Sky*. Released by the popular rock band Beyond in 1993, when Cantopop was still at the peak of its glory, the ballad is part of a collective memory in Hong Kong and has retained its popularity for more than a quarter of a century. With its lyrics alluding to the yearning for one's dream and freedom, it is a song of hope that has been adopted for different events, campaigns, and protests.<sup>12</sup> In this respect it is typical. The language of popular music is often semantically underspecified and affords a wide range of meanings that appeal to a divergent audience.

The theme song for the 2012 protest against the national education curriculum was Pink Floyd's *Another Brick in the Wall*. Its signature lines – *'We don't need no education. We don't need no thought control'* – appeared as protest signs and slogans that articulated the young protesters' refusal to be 'brainwashed'. The original English song was used in the protest, without localisation.

Multiple songs were heard during the prolonged Occupy movement in 2014, including *Under the Vast Sky*. The most prominent song for the protest was *Do You Hear the People Sing* from the Broadway musical *Les Misérables*, as well as its Cantonese version localised specifically during the protest.<sup>13</sup> The Cantonese lyrics urges people to listen to their conscience, speak up, and protect the city. Various versions were released on YouTube and widely circulated on social media.<sup>14</sup> After the police fired teargas on the protesters, activist Lo Hiu-pan composed an original song *Raise the Umbrella* to boost the morale of the protesters (*South China Morning Post* December 29 2014). It was performed by pop artists Denise Ho, Anthony Wong, and Deanie Ip. With a slow-paced and calming tune, and lyrics that focused on solidarity and hope, the song paints a peaceful image of the Occupy movement.<sup>15</sup>

There was an initial resistance in the Water Movement against singing, since earlier protests were viewed by young people as futile; a commentator described them as 'karaoke-style': 'go to the street, shout a few slogans, raise a few banners, feeling good after venting the anger;

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no one cares if any outcome is achieved in the end' (Kursk, cited in Lee and Chan 2018: 57). That resistance appeared to have given in with the release of *Glory to Hong Kong*. For an original composition (as contrasted with a cover song with a familiar tune) that could not get much airtime on mass media, the speed at which *Glory to Hong Kong* gained popularity was remarkable. Released on 31 August 2019, it took only two days before protestors belted it out during a football match, and for hundreds of people to sing it in a shopping mall another day later (Ho 2020). Not only has it attracted millions of viewers/listeners on YouTube, iTunes and Spotify, it topped YouTube HK's 2019 local music video list. It had been memorised quickly and was performed during public rallies. Unlike popular music that people acquaint with through exposure in mass media and public spaces, this is a song that people need to be proactive in listening to in digital media.

### i The Making Of

Composer Thomas told *Time Magazine* that he sees music as a tool for unity and that he wrote the song to unite the people in Hong Kong and to boost their morale (*Time Magazine* 10 September 2019). What is interesting about the making of the song is how creativity and talent was crowdsourced by soliciting feedback and editing on draft lyrics posted on LIHKG. Thomas also recruited help for mixing and arrangement, as well as some 20 performers from the same forum to make a studio recording of the song (*South China Morning Post* 6 December 2019). Unlike music that is professionally produced and presented to the public, this song was created in a decentralised manner, very much like the protest itself. Different groups then went on to create their own version of the song and shared them on YouTube.

Many semiotic choices are made in music making. The fact that the original recording of the song was performed by a group instead of by an individual suggests that the song attempts to bring people together. Voices of men and women in unison articulates a motivational frame (Benford and Snow 2000) for collective action in the social movement.

Another choice has to do with instrumentation. The official

recording of the song carries a march-like feeling as it was orchestrated with snare drum and trumpets, which sound like footsteps. Brass and drums are traditionally associated with military and marching bands. Military music is used to mobilise support, unite soldiers, and threaten the enemy during a battle; in modern times, its function is primarily ceremonial.

## ii Lyrics

The lyrics of the song used vocabulary that is common in Christian writing. This is more noticeable in the Cantonese than in the English version, as evident in the terms such as ‘榮光’ (‘glory’) in the Cantonese lyrics, which one hardly encounters in everyday Cantonese but frequently appears in Cantonese hymns which are translated from English. The lexical choice is likely to reflect the educational experience of many Hong Kongers who attended schools run by various Christian denominations, thanks to the colonial history of Hong Kong.<sup>16</sup>

The lyrics of the song and my translation are provided below.<sup>17</sup>

何以 這土地 淚再流	Why does this land shed tears again?
何以 令眾人 亦憤恨	Why are the people enraged?
昂首 拒默沉 吶喊聲 響透	Keep our heads up, our voices strong
盼自由 歸於 這裡	May freedom root here
何以 這恐懼 抹不走	Why can't this fear be wiped away?
何以 為信念 從沒退後	Why do the faithful never retreat?
何解 血在流 但邁進聲 響透	Why do we bleed, but still march forward?
建自由 光輝 香港	To build a free and glorious Hong Kong
在晚星 墜落 徬徨午夜	Stars may fall, and the night may be long and dark
迷霧裡 最遠處吹來 號角聲	Through the mist, a distant bugle blasts

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捍自由 來齊集這裡 來全力抗對 勇氣 智慧 也永不滅	Stand with us, join together and resist Our bravery and wisdom will forever live
黎明來到 要光復 這香港	We will reclaim Hong Kong at the break of dawn
同行兒女 為正義 時代革命	Sons and daughters, for justice, wage the revolution of our time
祈求 民主與自由 萬世都不朽	Democracy and freedom shall always shine
我願榮光歸香港	May glory be to Hong Kong

Like battle hymns, the lyrics of *Glory to Hong Kong* talk about fear and hope, pain and sacrifice, bravery and commitment. They suggest the need to fight, moving beyond a long history of peaceful protests in Hong Kong. References to blood and the bugle no doubt conjure up the imagery of a battlefield, focusing on the here and now and calling upon people to fight for a collective ideal – in this case, ‘justice’ (stanza 4). Gamson notes that injustice creates “the righteous anger that puts fire in the belly and iron in the soul” (Gamson 1992: 32). It transcends intellectual judgment, and this, moreover, is one of the reasons why framing struggles in terms of justice/injustice can be key to the political consciousness of collective action. In this case, the lyrics of *Glory to Hong Kong* seem to suggest that the path to justice requires bloodshed and overcoming fear, implying that legal mobilisation or polite politics is no longer a viable route. Read literally, they provide the discursive frame for the radicalisation of tactics. However, references to a distant bugle and the need to march forward as though one is at the front line of a warzone are clearly metaphorical. The lyrics could resonate with moderates who are not necessarily prepared for bloodshed.

Elsewhere, the song’s lyrics appeal to universal values such as ‘freedom’ and ‘democracy’, which readily borrow semiotic power from the growing anti-authoritarian sentiment of the new Cold War. The intended outcome is ‘glory’, which does not translate to any specific political goal. There is plenty of semantic ambiguity in words such as

‘reclaim’ and ‘revolution’, which are intertextual references to the 2016 campaign slogan ‘Reclaim Hong Kong, the Revolution of Our Time’ by a young localist leader Edward Leung when he ran for the Legislative Council by-election. While the co-author of the slogan said they used the term ‘reclaim’ in protest against parallel traders whose activities disrupted people’s daily lives, they subsequently created the slogan, using ‘reclaim’ to mean ‘restoring the lost glamour of Hong Kong’, and ‘revolution’ to mean letting young people lead social changes (Wong 2020). But of course, ‘reclaim’ and ‘revolution’ can be interpreted very differently. Pro-Beijing lawyer and politician Maria Tam argues that ‘reclaim’ or ‘liberate’ in Chinese implies separatism, which contravenes the Basic Law (Wong 2020).

In the fourth stanza, the song also uses the parent-child metaphor typical of nationalist discourse (cf. concepts such as *motherland*), which suggests a natural and intimate bond (like biological parentage) between a person and his/her place of birth (Johnson 1987). Although the lyrics do not make explicit what the people are resisting against, the land they are seeking to protect is local and has clearly defined geographical borders.

All in all, the lyrics express a strong collective identity for Hong Kong and use justice as a master frame to motivate the audience. Since internal fragmentation contributed to the failure of the Umbrella Movement, activists in 2019 agreed to remain united no matter what, often calling for moderates and radicals to work together. The semantic ambiguity of *Glory to Hong Kong*’s lyrics deliberately masks the contestations that exist among the movement participants (more on this in the section below). In his discussion of the emotional power of music, Rühlig (2016) notes that songs can help people express their feelings even when the lyrics are not specific to their situation. Importantly, through its structural elements such as tempo, mode, volume, melody and rhythm, music does not only help express but can evoke emotions before the lyrics are rationally processed (Sloboda and Juslin 2010). In other words, people can feel emotionally connected to the song even if they do not ideologically align with all its words.

### **iii Digitally Mediated Renditions**

The original music video for *Glory to Hong Kong* was posted directly on YouTube and used footage of the movement as its visual background. With mainstream media now largely under pro-establishment control, the Internet has become the major platform for social activists in Hong Kong to disseminate information. These audiovisual renditions of the song therefore convey not only emotions and thoughts, but they can also have a truth-bearing function (Eyerman and Jamison 1998). The video could multimodally authenticate protestors, their actions, and perspectives as the truth of their situation (Way 2017).

Viewer response to the original video is worthy of attention here, for it may shed light on why it went viral and offer a glimpse of what people thought about it, even though comments posted on YouTube cannot be taken as representative of wider listener response. The comment with the highest number of upvotes (20k) reads: ‘so this is what it feels like, getting teary from hearing the national anthem’. Some other commentators expressed a sense of pride, warmth and belonging they felt when they listened to the song. At the same time, other commentators are wary of the label of ‘national anthem’, and urge others to stick to the five demands and stay away from any suspicion of separatist claims. The diversity in viewer response – from those who have a budding nationalist imagination and those who are wary of it – shows that the song has attracted sympathetic responses from a wide political spectrum. It also shows that the coherence and unity articulated in the lyrics do not reflect the unresolved internal tensions within the movement – the kind of conflicts between political dissidents and successionists Fu (2020) alluded to. The lyrics steered clear of darker subcurrents in the movement, such as its xenophobic and intolerant factions (Palmer 2020). This is not dissimilar to the anthem of the 2009 Iranian protest, which also relied on its poetic abstractedness and universalism to appeal to its diverse supporters (Leone 2012).

Many digitally mediated variations of the Cantonese song have also been produced. One version of the song was performed by a full orchestra dressed in protest gear (gas masks, goggles, and helmets),<sup>18</sup>

Towards the end of the video, smoke could be seen in the background as the musicians performed, reminiscent of tear gas smoke that protesters regularly faced. This visual rendition provides the political context to interpret the song, suggesting that performers of this song represent protesters, who are suffering injustice. The dramatic costume and visualisation contribute to a multimodal expression of trauma as a common experience that bonds people together. The visualization shows that their immediate grievance relates to the police response to protests, which was, of course, backed by the government. Other mediated versions of the song, such as its Cantonese opera and sign language adaptations, seem to be used to appeal to different sectors of the community and garner local support.<sup>19</sup>

Unlike earlier protest songs that were imported from overseas and domesticated with Cantonese lyrics, *Glory to Hong Kong* started in Cantonese and was subsequently rendered in many foreign languages, sometimes through diasporic Hong Kong communities.<sup>20</sup> The effort to internationalise the song on digital media is both a means for local protesters to reach out for external support and for people abroad to express their solidarity to Hong Kong. Multilingual renditions of the song offer a sense of authenticity in the global support garnered. The need for reaching out conveys a lack of faith in resolving grievances through the local political and legal system.

It is also worth mentioning that pro-establishment parties have tried to produce secondary creations of the song by changing the lyrics to praise the police and condemn the movement. One of these renditions was legislator Julius Ho's *Peace Upon Hong Kong*, which has since been taken down by YouTube for copyright violation (Chiu 2019).

## **vi Performances and Signification**

Perhaps even more interesting than how the song was produced was how it was used during the movement. Much has been written about the visuality of the Umbrella Movement (Garrett 2015; Lou and Jaworski 2016): sculptures, posters, stickers, photographs, post-it notes, etc. The prolonged occupation of a physical site allows for a highly

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saturated visual landscape. Although the Water Movement was also filled with visual spectacles, the movement's fluidity encouraged more transient forms of expression. Protesting with one's voice is one such form. For instance, for several months protestors screamed protest slogans from their apartment windows at 10pm every night as a way of boosting morale (Creery 2019a).

As the government competed for the moral high ground, it painted a picture of protestors as rioters (sometimes even as terrorists) who were violent and destructive. Because singing is a peaceful activity that is not normally considered a disruption to public order, protestors started gathering in different public spaces to sing *Glory to Hong Kong* during the movement. When sung collectively, the audience may develop an affective response not only to the song but to the emotions expressed by other people participating in the event. On several occasions, protests became a singing contest when pro-government protesters showed up to wave Chinese flags and sing *March of the Volunteers* (Sum and Huang 2019). These were battles in music between Cantonese and Mandarin, the 'Hong Kong national anthem' and the Chinese national anthem, and sub-state nationalists and nationalists. Apart from public spaces such as shopping malls, *Glory to Hong Kong* was also sung by protestors during football matches and school morning assemblies as a sign of defiance when national anthem was played (RTHK September 10 2019), therefore directly competing with the national anthem. One interpretation of the popularity of the protest anthem is that it provided a semiotic resource that people had been looking for to counter the imminent imposition of a national anthem with which they struggled to identify. In this respect, it is striking that, in contrast to earlier protest music in Hong Kong, some protestors started putting their right hand to their left chest (i.e., where the heart is) when they sang *Glory to Hong Kong* – a gesture typically made when one sings a national anthem.<sup>21</sup> This semiotic reclaim of sovereignty cannot be missed, viewed in the shadow of the proposed national anthem law during a time of conflict.

## **v Aftermath**

Despite the rhetoric sometimes used in the movement and the budding nationalist imagination conveyed in some renditions of the song, the actions taken in the movement were much more typical of a prodemocracy social movement than a revolution. Militia activities were limited. Words used in the political context, such as during protests, cannot be taken too literally, as many of them are hyperbolic and metaphorical expressions. For example, anthems that portray an armed struggle may be used as political songs to stir up feelings of patriotism, but in context they are rarely literally a call to arms. Just like protest slogans that are empty signifiers with no fixed meanings (Lee et al. 2019), political expressions such as the song *Glory to Hong Kong* cannot be reduced to a singular, literal meaning.

Not taking a chance, however, Beijing decided to nip the rise of a Hong Kong nationalism in the bud by imposing the National Security Law, the passing of which had bypassed the Hong Kong legislature (Toru 2020; see also Fu 2020 for background about China's imperatives in imposing national security legislation in Hong Kong). While any move towards political independence would clearly be unacceptable to Beijing, the National Security Law has such sweeping powers that the voicing of any political opposition about any public matter now bears a risk in Hong Kong. A snitching hotline has been set up for people to report on one another for potential endangerment to national security, recording 100,000 tips during the first six months of its operation (Lo 2021). The annual 4<sup>th</sup> June vigil and the 1<sup>st</sup> July protest are no longer permitted. To date, over a hundred protestors, including activists Tony Chung and Agnes Chow, have been arrested for offending the National Security Law, which carries a maximum punishment of life imprisonment. The only remaining opposition newspaper in Hong Kong shut down in June 2021 after its top editors were arrested under National Security Law charges (Mahtani, McLaughlin and Yu 2021). At the same time, orderly politics no longer seems to be a viable form of resistance in Hong Kong: prodemocratic election candidates and elected legislators have been disqualified or prosecuted; some have fled Hong

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Kong and are now on exile. After all the remaining prodemocratic legislators resigned in solidarity, there is not a single oppositional politician left in the legislature. The process of de-democratization is near complete.

The National Anthem Ordinance in Hong Kong has also been passed in Hong Kong. Effective from 12 June 2020, a person commits an offence if s/he publicly and intentionally insults the anthem in any way. Primary and secondary schools are required to teach the anthem to students. The government has now pronounced that chanting the protest slogan ‘Reclaim Hong Kong, the Revolution of Our Time’ would be illegal under the National Security Law. Meanwhile, the government has refused to comment on whether singing the song *Glory to Hong Kong* would be illegal. In July 2020, the Education Bureau has banned students from singing, playing, or broadcasting the protest anthem on campus because it contains political messages (*The Guardian* July 8 2020). Whether singing it outside school premises would break the law remains unresolved.

After the enactment of the National Security Law, there were isolated incidents of people gathering in public spaces and singing the protest anthem. In one incident, which happened in a shopping mall in Mong Kok in August, the police issued the crowd a fine for violating the Covid gathering ban (Cheng 2020). Chinese-Filipino busker Oliver Ma sang the song on the street twice; twice he was arrested, on charges apparently unrelated to the National Security Law: for obstructing police officers and possession of offensive weapon (for a pair of toy handcuffs that he wears during performance as a social commentary) (Freemuse 2021; Ho 2021). There was also an incident of the public address speaker system at an MTR station being hacked twice to play the song in lieu of station announcements. In the meantime, the song and its various multimedia renditions are still accessible on the Internet.

The murky legal status of the protest anthem reflects a climate of fear and self-censorship now prevalent in Hong Kong. Although so far nobody has been charged with the National Security Law for performing the song, it is conceivable that such behaviour may be

considered an incitement to secessionism (Article 20-21). Similarly, it is unclear how much latitude one has in expressing of political disagreement before it could be deemed subversive (Article 22), and when communication with foreign nationals may be considered collusion (Articles 29-30). Case law is not yet available to show where boundaries may be drawn. Some cases may be tried in mainland China (Article 55) and trials may be held behind closed doors (Article 41). Beijing, instead of Hong Kong courts, will have the power to decide what the law means (Article 65).

### **Conclusion: Quietly, into that Cold Night**

Certain renditions of *Glory to Hong Kong* may well reflect a budding national imagination in Hong Kong, even though separatism is not on the agenda for most protesters. For one thing, the five demands made by the protesters can be read within the framework of One Country, Two Systems. Moreover, China is, after all, a multinational state (preamble of the Chinese constitution; see also Zhu & Blachford 2006). Not all nationalist sentiments crystallise into a movement of political independence that threatens national sovereignty. Poole (2005) notes that the language of nationalism may be used to express a profound discontent, such as the experience of social or economic marginalisation. Although sub-state nationalism is understandably seen by the state as a national security threat, suppressing the expression of discontent without tackling its source only aggravates it.

Social movements do not only transform politics but also culture and identity. The power of musical expressions in social movements is that even when the movement dwindles, their music can live on as a cultural artefact. Even if people are not allowed to sing it out loud as a protest anthem, a song can live on in people's memories. In that sense, unlike what the title of this paper suggests, music does not die. In fact, the experience of banning music in post-revolutionary Iran showed a boomerang effect: the more music is pushed underground, the more subversive, desirable, and explosive it may become (Leone 2012).

The National Security Law has quenched the public imagination

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of nationhood in Hong Kong, but it has not quenched the longing for justice. The violence that protestors experienced came from various repressive state apparatus, including policing and law, which the government has monopoly over. When doors to justice appeared to be closed in their current reality, protesters were looking for ways to restore the freedom they once enjoyed (thus 'reclaiming' Hong Kong) and to recreate a society with a government that is accountable to its people. Now that the National Security Law has kept secessionism at bay, the best way of restoring confidence in government is to put a stop to the perceived erosion of the rule of law, which can act as a pressure valve for grievances and has been a foundation of Hong Kong's success.

Another challenge to the future of social movements in Hong Kong is internal and ideological. The vagueness of expressions that unite the protestors suggests a lack of ideological cohesion amongst them. The strengths and shortcomings of a leaderless social movement are one and the same: people of different ideological positions may be brought together as a united front. The same unity that gives power to the movement can lead to an inability to critique undemocratic and non-liberal discourses within the movement. One example from the Water Movement is the popular curse of death against policemen's family members. Clearly, it is not compatible with a rule of law society to punish the family members of even the worst criminals. Some protestors are loyal Trump supporters, for the enemy of their enemy must be their friend (Kipnis 2020), and are willing to overlook his lies, racism, sexism, and assault on democracy. Not all protestors agree with these expressions. These ideological differences lurk behind a seemingly solidified identity of a Hong Konger. Even without new legal restrictions, these internal tensions plague the prospect of the next social movement in Hong Kong.

Through the lens of the protest anthem, this paper has illustrated the past and present state of social movements in Hong Kong. Social movements in Hong Kong flourished during the late colonial period and the first 23 years after the handover. Compared with earlier times (Chen 2017), law has become less a resource for social movements in

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Hong Kong but more a restraint. Based on Tilly and Wood (2009)'s model, social movements are likely to recede with de-democratization. What complicates the picture is that Hong Kong has not only been subjected to dramatic changes in local law, but has been caught in the middle of the rapid legal crossfires between global powers. The future is unknown, and probably cannot be gauged from China's internal politics alone.

### **Acknowledgements:**

The author is indebted to Matt and Rebekah AuYeung who have been most generous in sharing their musical expertise. She would also like to thank attendees at the Law, Listening and Injustice Symposium, held at the University of Wollongong in February 2020, for their feedback on an earlier version of the paper, and Ms Lam Ling Chung, Melissa, for her research assistance. The author is also grateful to her colleagues Christopher Hutton and Adam Jaworski, and two anonymous reviewers, for their invaluable feedback.

### **Endnotes**

1. The future enactment of this law is prescribed in Article 23 of the Basic Law in Hong Kong.
2. Even though the protest ended with the government making the curriculum optional instead of mandatory, many schools have now incorporated national education into their curriculum.
3. The Umbrella Movement is widely seen as a defeat despite the fact that the electoral reform was ultimately rejected by the Legislative Council.
4. The arrangements for the surrender of fugitive offenders applicable in the Fugitive Offenders Ordinance (Cap. 503) ('FOO') are not applicable to 'other parts of the PRC'. Under this law, Taiwan is considered as part of China.
5. The Fugitive Offenders and Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters Legislation (Amendment) Bill 2019 would introduce into the FOO a new rendition arrangement between HK and other parts of China (including Mainland China, Taiwan and Macau).

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6. Localist groups on a wide political spectrum have emerged. Progressive localists are interested in protecting local heritage and pursuing social equity. Right-wing localists are populist and xenophobic. See Kaeding (2017), and Chen and Szeto (2015).
7. A peaceful demonstration involving a human chain formed with approximately two million people across three Baltic states, which aimed to express their popular desire for independence from Soviet rule.
8. One source of quantitative data for the evolving sense of identity in Hong Kong comes from a longitudinal survey conducted by the Public Opinion Programme at the University of Hong Kong. Survey data collected over the years show a steady increase of participants self-identifying as Hong Kongers (peaking at 52.9 per cent in 2019), and a record lowest percentage of participants identifying as Chinese (at 10.8 per cent) in 2019. See See HKUPOP data published at <<https://www.hkupop.hku.hk/english/popexpress/ethnic/eidentity/poll/datatables.html>>
9. In 2010, the Education Bureau circulated guidelines for flag display at schools (Education Bureau 2010). By 2015/2016, 72 per cent of primary schools and 37 per cent of secondary schools in Hong Kong were using Putonghua to teach Chinese (The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region 2018).
10. The Chinese anthem *March of the Volunteers* was written in the 1930s about volunteer armies that fought against the Japanese during the invasion of Manchuria. The song is a march, adopting a western form; the lyrics are in Mandarin. The lyricist Tian Han was imprisoned during the Cultural Revolution and died in prison.
11. This soundtrack comprises both older songs deemed fitting for the occasion, and songs written as a reaction to the tragedy such as *For Freedom, No Need to Face Darkness Anymore*, *Freedom Flower*.
12. The chorus roughly translates as “Forgive me for loving freedom all my life / Though I’m also afraid of falling one day / It is easy to give up one’s dreams / But I won’t fear even if there’s just you and me left.”
13. Typically, much Cantopop has been produced – and localised – in a similar fashion whereby Cantonese lyrics are transplanted into tunes borrowed from overseas sources.
14. One of the renditions of the song, featuring a young child, is available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o2aYJrP1iNw>

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15. Rühlig (2016) also observes that after the Occupy ended, a radical and xenophobic kind of localism emerged and may be captured in the cover song *Gau Yu Everyday*.
16. The 'Primary Schools Profiles 2020' contained the most recent data on religion in HSKAR schools at the time of writing (Committee on Home-School Co-operation 2020).
17. My translation prioritises the literal meaning of the original at the cost of its literary appeal. The original version of the song is viewable at <https://youtu.be/y7yRDOLCy4Y>
18. *Glory to Hong Kong* available at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ulera9c18F0>>
19. Cantonese opera is much more popular with older than younger generations in Hong Kong; see analysis in Creery 2019b. A Cantonese opera version of *Glory to Hong Kong* is available at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F5Rm5ujBm2o>>; a sign language version is available at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MbUn5GqUKic>>
20. For example, *Glory to Hong Kong* was subsequently translated into English, Japanese, Korean, German, Italian, French and other languages; these multilingual versions of the song are available on YouTube at the time of writing.
21. This etiquette is specified in the U.S. Flag Code, even though it is not legally enforced. See Blackmore 2016.

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