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Guerilla Media: A look at the role of graffiti in Hong Kong's protests for democracy

When the elevator arrived on the floor for Hong Kong University (HKU), the smell of paint hit me first. After days of encountering masked, hard hat wearing student heralds standing where the station and university meet armed with signs proclaiming the day's latest protest statements, I had expected more of the same. What I found, however, was a rainbow dome of umbrellas hiding a group of those masked students as they huddled close to the ground. By this time, the group had already finished their first two symbols, a trail of light leading to their current position and the crowd of curious cameras they had amassed. As the hiss of the spray halted and the umbrellas began to shift farther down the landing, I moved closer to add my camera to those that had gone by. I snapped a quick shot before escaping the fumes:



(translation: Free Hong Kong, Revolution Now)

This sort of graffiti exists outside the community and walkways of HKU. Anti-police sentiments have appeared on signs leading to train stations. "Chinazi" can be found on the walls of buildings from Central to Kowloon. From the recent Hong Kong demonstrations for democracy, paint and damaged property are some of the tangible remnants left in their wake. Some, including the Hong Kong government, would categorize the graffiti as mere vandalism, an outlet for the growing frustration amidst a time when everything seems uncertain. However, these sometimes flagrant phrases can inspire public sympathy when news media can be easily vilified and denounces the protestor's actions.

The graffiti around Hong Kong can disseminate information in a way that traditional and social media cannot accomplish by reclaiming physical space and bringing issues from the abstract of the online into the forefront of the tangible world even once the protestors are gone.



Hong Kong has a history of utilizing graffiti to express dissent or opposition to the public in a form that is inherently subversive. [Tsang Tsou-choi](#), or the “King of Kowloon,” was a major influence for current Hong Kong street artists. He spent fifty years marking surfaces – motorcycles, train station pillars, and electricity boxes – to stake his claim to land that he believed once belonged to his ancestors. Until his death in 2007, Tsang painted the names of his family members as a mark of ownership or into positions of political power using phrases such as “China’s new

emperor Tsang Fu-tong” in reference to a role he believed should have been bestowed on his son.

The King of Kowloon’s acts of reclaiming space have bled into the acts of protestors in opposition to the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). On the evening of July 1, [protestors forced their way into the building of Hong Kong’s Legislative Council](#) (LegCo). During the night, protestors defaced several of the building’s elements, including the city’s official emblem and the portraits of the current and previous LegCo presidents. None of these actions were just senseless acts of vandalism and destruction. Only the portion of the emblem that referenced the People’s Republic of China (PRC) was blacked out. The only portraits that were destroyed were those of presidents post the handover of Hong Kong to the PRC in 1997. A bench within the building was also painted with the phrase, “Hong Kong is not China, not yet.”

The graffiti here was a clear act of reclaiming the space for Hongkongers in opposition to functional constituencies, the thirty seats in the legislature that are reserved for decision by members of certain professions, and the PRC’s control over the election of the region’s chief executive. Protestors while physically occupying the space staked their claim in writing along the building’s walls, publicly marking their territory in a manner that is not only symbolic for their cause but



would remain long enough for those in the legislature to see and remember, imprinting in a way that a simple tweet could never do.

Writings within the LegCo building are echoed in the actions of the students at Hong Kong University. The slogans of the protest, “Free Hong Kong, Revolution Now” and “Five Demands Not One Less” lay claim to the campus as a space that supports the protests’ objectives. However, HKU being a college campus, an environment that many of the protestors come from, it can be assumed that HKU is a space that exists for students to share their opinions. Here, the graffiti seems to veer from the objective of reclaiming in a physical sense to that of claiming a group identity. Marking the ground along campus, heavy flyering, and the presence of students in masks handing out materials serves to present the university as a united front.

The constant presence of giant slogans produces an environment of shared identity that a news source or social media could not. In the case of traditional media, the consumer must opt-in to see or share content and present an opinion. The graffiti at HKU, on the other hand, to an outsider feels as if it speaks for all those on campus. Even though this is [untrue](#) as many of the students on campus have renounced the protests as unnecessarily violent or are international students with a less urgent stake in the happenings of Hong Kong, the constant presence and reproduction of anti-government graffiti has produced an environment that convinces one otherwise. It takes away the element of self-segregation and insulation that is common on media platforms. Everyone is collectively categorized under this umbrella of supporting the movement. These few words on a walkway present a movement that is both unified and powered by, perhaps not the institution of the university, but the students that populate it.

Outside of contained spaces, such as the LegCo building and HKU, the graffiti of protestors takes a role that is far more targeted at the general public than government officials or administrators. Here, even vulgar phrases like, “Capitalism is shit. The CCP is capitalist,” are meant more to draw awareness to the issues that Hong Kong is currently facing. This graffiti, while continuing to lay claim to space and perpetuate a shared identity, is presented to the public. These spray-painted words have created a backdrop for Hong Kong’s current position as a world stage.



These acts are reminiscent of the 2011 [pro-Ai Weiwei graffiti](#) that cropped up across Hong Kong to raise awareness of his detainment by Chinese authorities. During this time, street art and demonstrations served to capture the eyes of the PRC, angering officials while also holding them accountable. This sent a message that Hong Kong could see what they were doing and would not stand for the injustice.

Here, however, this graffiti with large amounts of it written in English, is meant to appeal to the world. While it may be located along the city streets of Hong Kong, it appears in videos of protestors released in any news regarding the protests. This allows, in a protest without a defined leader or spokesperson, for pithy slogans, pleas to be freed, and general anger at the CCP to be heard without anyone having to say a word.

In Hong Kong, the writing on the wall is not simply an act of vandalism or the effect of a teenager with too much free time. It has a history of rallying communities and subverting government control to proclaim ownership of space. This is what the protestors of Hong Kong plan to accomplish by advocating for suffrage and autonomy and the graffiti only helps to illustrate who the government of Hong Kong rightfully belongs to: its people.