


RESEARCH ARTICLE

Visual Framing: The Use of COVID-19 in the Mobilization of Hong Kong Protest

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Abstract

This study focuses on the Hong Kong Lennon Walls and the communications posted there. We assert that the physical placement of COVID-19 related images on the Lennon Walls of Hong Kong and the replication of symbols and iconography from the Umbrella Movement and the Anti-ELAB Movement situated COVID-19 discourse not only physically within but also symbolically within the contentious politics of Hong Kong. We conclude that the messages and images posted on Lennon Walls between January and April 2020 have used COVID-19 to extend public expression of sentiment on the debates around the Hong Kong government and to further mobilize a sense of Hong Kong identity against China. The findings contribute to the understandings of how the cultural politics surrounding the pandemic became a collective action frame in the mobilization of a localized Hong Kong political identity against the Hong Kong and Chinese governments.

摘要

本文探讨香港连依牆以及透过连依牆所传播的讯息。我们分析了连依牆上与新冠肺炎有关的符号和图像,认为其与 2014 年香港雨伞运动以及 2019 年反修例运动的图像有相当程度的一致性。在具体空间以及象征意义上,我们发现新冠肺炎的相关论述被连接到香港抗争政治的脉络上。在新冠肺炎爆发后(2020 年一月到四月),连依牆上的讯息和图像透过肺炎作为构框(frame),延伸对于香港政府的公众论述和情绪表达,并动员香港认同以对抗中国。本文的研究贡献在于指出对于全球疫情的文化政治如何转化成为一种集体行动的论述框架,用来动员在地化的香港政治认同以对抗香港和中国政府。

Keywords: Lennon Wall; COVID-19; visual framing; cultural politics; Hong Kong identity; China

关键词: 连依牆; 新冠肺炎; 影像构框; 文化政治; 香港认同; 中国

The outbreak of COVID-19 quickly evolved into a global issue, posing significant challenges not only to health governance across the globe but also to international relations as countries navigated their way through the diplomatically sensitive question of border closures. Leaders and health officials have made pronouncements about regulations and offered advice to their people. In many countries, governments quickly closed their borders to travellers from the People's Republic of China, where the first infected cases were confirmed, and later expanded travel bans to all non-national residents. Governments have restricted international and domestic movement and activated emergency powers to require people to wear masks, close entertainment venues, release certain health information and isolate in quarantine facilities. These anti-epidemic measures have been politicized in different ways across the globe – for example, wearing a mask (or not) has come to signify an individual's political stance in the US,¹ and vaccine passports are emerging as controversial issues in the UK and Australia.²

1 Kerr, Panagopoulos and der Linden 2021.

2 Pavli and Maltezos 2021.

In Hong Kong, border closures, restriction of domestic movement and information sharing have taken on a unique political complexity as the COVID-19 pandemic emerged against a political backdrop dominated in recent times by protests sparked by the proposal of the Fugitive Offenders and Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters Legislation (Amendment) Bill 2019 (Extradition Bill, hereafter). These protests evolved into a broader movement (known as the Anti-ELAB Movement) that tapped into pre-existing concerns and discourse on Hong Kong's political and cultural identity with respect to China.³ In this context, the Hong Kong government's pandemic response has become another point of contention in local political and identity politics. Decisions to keep the border open with China, ban the 4 June vigil and postpone elections for the Legislative Council have been *perceived* as being motivated by political considerations rather than a concern for public health. Thus, the authenticity of the government's "ethos of responsibility" for the population has been questioned.

This has been a markedly different dynamic compared to that which existed during the SARS outbreak of 2003. At that time, medical professional associations worked in close alliance with the government to respond to the public health crisis. However, in January and February of 2020, medical workers went on strike in protest against the perceived inaction of the government to protect the population by closing the border with China and securing sufficient supplies of personal protective equipment (PPE) for frontline medical staff.⁴ Here it is important to note that during the Anti-ELAB protests, medical workers had unionized in response to the state's use of violence against citizens and perceived disregard for any ethos of responsibility for the safety of its citizens.⁵ The perceived moral cleavage between the state and the medical profession, and the communication networks established during the Anti-ELAB Movement provided the conditions for speedy re-mobilization and utilization of pre-existing semiotic resources. The leaderless nature of the protest,⁶ along with the persisting mistrust of the incapable government before and during the pandemic, provided opportunities for the mobilization of professional activism and for framing articulation over the civic-based identification with a local democratic community.⁷

Like in many other countries, Hong Kongers have shared information about COVID-19 and their opinions of the government's pandemic response on social media platforms. However, messages about COVID-19 were also posted by the public on the Lennon Walls that emerged months earlier during the height of the Anti-ELAB Movement. Lennon Walls in Hong Kong have become important urban sites of contention and mobilization.⁸ Individuals engage with the protest as their memories and emotions are triggered as they pass through these spaces laden with visual stimulation and contextual meaning.⁹ The placement of COVID-19 related material on the Lennon Walls is significant when viewed in the context of local Hong Kong contentious politics and the broader geopolitical manoeuvring going on between Hong Kong and China.

In this article, we bring together two important literatures – social semiotics and social movement studies – in an exploration of the visual representation of COVID-19 on Hong Kong's Lennon Walls in early 2020. We argue that the posting of social commentary and visual representations of COVID-19 on the Lennon Walls situated the cultural politics of the pandemic squarely within the contentious politics of Hong Kong–China relations. Looking through the lens of social semiotics, we assert the semiotic resources utilized to construct messages about COVID-19 deliberately located COVID-19 within Hong Kong's semiotic system of protest. This in turn confirmed the Lennon Walls as a semiotic mode, i.e. a specific and organized set of socio-culturally shaped

3 Lee, Francis, et al. 2019.

4 Li and Ng 2021.

5 Ma and Cheng 2021.

6 Liang and Lee 2021.

7 Yuen et al. 2021.

8 Li and Whitworth 2022b; Wang, Ye and Chan 2019.

9 Patsiaouras, Veneti and Green 2018; Valjakka 2020.

resources for meaning making.¹⁰ From the perspective of social movement studies, COVID-19 became a new collective action frame to stoke anti-government sentiment and revive the momentum of the Anti-ELAB Movement. By pairing signs and symbols within Hong Kong's contentious lexicon with new signs associated with the pandemic, the COVID-19 related material presented new diagnostic and prognostic collective action frames that amplified the existing frames and demands of key targets of the movement: China, the Hong Kong government including the chief executive, and the Hong Kong police.

Theoretical Framework

Framing as a mobilization strategy in the social movement

Framing has been widely discussed in the fields of social movement, collective action and culture studies.¹¹ These studies focus on the characteristic features of collective action frames,¹² the consequences of such framing,¹³ and the generated or debated meanings in contentious politics.¹⁴ Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow claim that framing denotes an “active, processual phenomenon that implies agency and contention at the level of reality construction.”¹⁵ Framing and narrative building are important as they not only help individuals give meaning to and organize their experiences but can also shift the perceptions of the public and mobilize action. They also create or redefine meanings of action, enhance the legitimacy of actions and produce “new” collectivities.¹⁶ Collective action frames include an action-oriented function that contains “diagnostic framing” (defines the source of the problem), “prognostic framing” (the solution to the problem and possible future realities) and “motivational framing” (to highlight a need to take action).¹⁷

Methods of creating knowledge, along with types of social behaviour, modes of subjectivity and relationships of power are inherent within these frames and thus define boundaries between “us” and “them.”¹⁸ These frames connect ideas within sources including texts, photos or audio-visual presentation that include a particular interpretation or judgement, making a particular worldview or stereotype more salient.¹⁹

Framing, in this regard, is part of the contentious repertoire that links claimants, the object of claims and a “public.”²⁰ Images occupy a central role in communicating the aims and ideology of a protest movement as they can generate strong emotional responses in viewers and thus increase the resonance of movement frames,²¹ provide physiological “evidence” of immorality²² and represent “a way for citizens to reclaim national and popular memory from the authoritarian state.”²³

Meaning making: signification and interpretation

Processes of meaning making (i.e. signification and interpretation or semiosis) shape and are shaped by individuals and societies. Message senders are reliant on audiences imbued with culturally and individually specific lexicons who are familiar with the mode's rules of representation and

10 Liao 2022.

11 Benford and Snow 2000; Gahan and Pekarek 2013.

12 Vicari 2010.

13 Valocchi 1999.

14 Benford and Snow 2000; Goffman 1974.

15 Benford and Snow 2000, 614.

16 Cheng and Yuen 2019; Gahan and Pekarek 2013; Moragues-Faus 2017.

17 Almeida 2019; Benford and Snow 2000, 615.

18 Goffman 1974.

19 Hardin et al. 2002.

20 Tarrow and Tilly 2007.

21 Moore-Gilbert 2019; Seo and Ebrahim 2016; Valjakka 2020.

22 Halfmann and Young 2010; Patsiaouras, Veneti and Green 2018.

23 Khatib 2012, 11.

can interpret the intended message.²⁴ The social power of texts (visual or otherwise) in society depends on interpretation. Rather than being fixed into unchanging “codes,” signs are resources that people use and adapt (or “design”) to make meaning.²⁵ The meaning potential of semiotic resources can be vast but is constrained through use in a particular community and in response to certain social requirements of that community.²⁶ Once a set of semiotic resources is recognized by a community as having organizing principles for meaning making, it can be considered a mode. Different modes afford different opportunities for making meaning. Modal affordances are connected both to a mode’s material and social histories.

Scholars have widely discussed the “iconography of protest”²⁷ or “iconography of revolt.”²⁸ Movement-specific signs and symbols are developed to frame movement messages. Two text worlds are often brought together in parodies where the “the subject is treated in a contradictory manner: elevated subjects are debased and low ones are elevated.”²⁹ By cross-referencing symbols and lexicons message-senders are able to highlight their stance on political conflicts and draw a boundary between “us” and “them.”³⁰ The stark contrast between these two text worlds positions the message-sender as the “semantic authority” with which the audience is expected to agree.³¹ Visual symbols can also echo a collective action repertoire and have equal importance as action itself.³²

Data and Methods

This article is based on data drawn from 2,600 photographs taken of the Lennon Walls in Hong Kong between June 2019 and April 2020. We collected around 90 per cent of our data before the outbreak of COVID-19 in December 2019. The first examples of COVID-19 rhetoric emerged on the Lennon Walls in late January 2020. This timing coincides with the diagnoses of the first COVID-19 cases in Hong Kong on 23 January 2020 and the imposition of restrictions on 28 January 2020.

Similar to Georgios Patsiaouras and colleagues’ approach of focusing on photographic images to “serve as records of reality, as documentary evidence of the people, places, things, actions and events they depict,” we took photographs of each Lennon Wall site to capture the posted content as best as we could.³³ Given our desire to analyse the content of the images on the walls, we also took close up photographs of each computer-printed, photo-copied or hand drawn image posted on the walls. We coded 2,076 images. To increase the reliability of manual coding, we first came up with a coding scheme. In the first instance, each coder coded 50 images to test intercoder reliability and to make sure the coding was consistent.

We went to all districts at different times on a regular basis (one to two days a week) and made sure that COVID-19 images appeared in each district. We did not include “online Lennon Walls” in our analysis because, in this article, we focus on “physical” Lennon Walls to interrogate sentiments in spatial practices and their functions of framing. Further, by exemplifying personalized while connective action through physical Lennon Walls, we can extend Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg’s discussion of the connective action in digital media.³⁴ Finally, physical Lennon Walls

24 Barthes 1977; Hodge and Kress 1988; van Dijk 2005; 2006.

25 Hodge and Kress 1988.

26 Aiello 2006, 91.

27 Lahusen 1996; Lee, Doreen 2011.

28 Bing 1998; Kohns 2013.

29 Condren et al. 2008; Davis 2013.

30 Doerr and Teune 2012.

31 D’Errico and Poggi 2016.

32 Tarrow 2013.

33 Patsiaouras, Veneti and Green 2018, 81–82.

34 Bennett and Segerberg 2012.

provide elderly citizens with a channel through which to receive information, given that they may not have access to digital information.

The intended relationship between the visual signifier (“form”) and the signified (“meaning”) can be unpacked and analysed in myriad ways. Ronald Barthes emphasizes the “denotational” and “connotational,” or the literal meaning and the sociocultural, context specific associations of a sign.³⁵ Michael Halliday suggests every sign serves three functions simultaneously: to express something about the world (“ideational metafunction”), to position people in relation to each other (interpersonal meta-function) and to form connections with other signs to produce coherent text (“textual metafunction”).³⁶ Carey Jewitt and Rumiko Oyama focus on representation, interaction or orientation, and composition or organization.³⁷ Ron Scollon and Suzie Wong Scollon are interested specifically in visual semiotics, highlighting the importance of understanding the relationships between the components of an image, the producers and the components, and the components and the audience.³⁸ After examining the images, Amia Lieblich and colleagues’ interpretative model was used.³⁹ We created researcher-defined categories (for example, purpose, language use, sentiment, issue of concern, etc.) to understand the meanings of the content. We also drew on Barthes’ method of “reading images” to understand the “intended meanings” of images – their symbols, ideologies, placement, the interplay between images and words – and how these are perceived by creators and their viewers.⁴⁰ We examined the repertoire of socio-political meanings and the context in which images appeared, as they can change the meanings that audiences attribute to an image. This emphasis on context and the placement of the image serves as our departure point.

Findings

The next section provides brief accounts of the political context and manner in which “Lennon Walls” emerged. It concludes that the Lennon Wall is now an internationally recognized form of protest or “contentious performance.”⁴¹ In the section following the next, we identify the specific vocabulary of visual signs and symbols that appeared on the Lennon Walls and framed issues during the 2019 Anti-ELAB Movement. The final section showcases the replication and cross referencing of symbols and visual metaphors that have occurred over the course of Hong Kong’s contentious politics and, most recently, in the discourse on COVID-19.

Lennon Walls as modular performances

The “Lennon Wall” concept first emerged in Prague in the 1980s in the wake of John Lennon’s death. At the time, Czechoslovakia was still a communist country where freedom of speech, political association and demonstration were limited and Western images, symbols and pop culture were banned.⁴² Being in possession of such material, let alone replicating it in graffiti form in a public space, could result in a prison sentence for what the authorities labelled as “subversive activities against the state.”⁴³ After John Lennon was shot, an image of his face and pacifist lyrics from some of his songs were painted on the wall. The communist police regularly whitewashed the wall, but images, poems and the hopes of protestors continued to appear on the wall.⁴⁴ This cycle of

35 Barthes 1977.

36 Halliday 1978.

37 Jewitt and Oyama 2001.

38 Scollon and Scollon 2003.

39 Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber 1998.

40 Barthes 1977; Doerr, Mattoni and Teune 2013; Philipps 2012.

41 Tarrow and Tilly 2007.

42 Ulc 1971; Williams 1997.

43 Evanson 1986.

44 Bren 2008; Šmidrkal 2016.

expression followed by censorship became a small battle between the Czech people and the communist police who cleaned the wall. Thus, Lennon Walls and the pacifist lyrics of Beatles' songs that were painted there became a means to protest against the regime. Furthermore, the wall itself not only became a monument to John Lennon and his pacifist ideals but also a symbol of free speech and the non-violent rebellion of Czech youth against the communist regime.⁴⁵

Similar forms of collective, spatial expression of opinion have appeared elsewhere,⁴⁶ but particularly and most recently in Hong Kong. In September 2014, protests erupted in Hong Kong after the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress in China issued a decision (known as the 8.31 Framework) on reforms to Hong Kong's electoral system. The reforms were seen to significantly restrict democracy in the Special Administrative Region (SAR) and effectively permit Beijing to "pre-screen" the candidates for the position of Hong Kong chief executive. Crowds gathered in Admiralty, Mong Kok and Causeway Bay, and 72 days of sit-in protests ensued. On 29 September 2014, a small group of individuals began handing out post-it notes and pens to participants and passers-by in an attempt to collect and share citizens' opinions. These notes soon covered the whole of the wall leading into the Central Government Office. The site, later named the "Lennon Wall," became an important site of the movement and came to symbolize the people's peaceful resistance against the government.

During the 2019 protest against the introduction of the Extradition Bill, Lennon Walls appeared again. The Extradition Bill would have permitted extradition of individuals to China, a move seen to undermine Hong Kong's autonomy and infringe on civil liberties including the rule of law. Once again, citizens spontaneously expressed their thoughts and shared information on walls. The spatial practices adopted by participants in 2019 referenced those of the Umbrella Movement of 2014: writing messages on post-it notes and placing them on public walls was the primary method of communication.

The action in 2019 was of a much larger scale as the Lennon Wall evolved and exceeded the spatial confines of its 2014 origins in downtown Hong Kong, where it had been within the so-called occupied zone. Lennon Walls sprang up on footbridges, in pedestrian underpasses and at shopping malls in districts as far afield as Tuen Mun, Tung Chung, Tai Po and Fan Ling. Digital Lennon Walls existed on platforms such as Telegram and LIHKG,⁴⁷ and "mobile Lennon Walls" were created by the production of stickers and pins that could be attached to bus seats, bikes and school bags.⁴⁸ Furthermore, the methods of expression adopted by participants were more varied and organized. Groups produced information and graphics and disseminated them online for people to download and post on walls in their local area.

Analysing these descriptive historic accounts, it can be argued that the Lennon Wall in the context of Hong Kong and the "protest wall" more generally have become not only a spatial practice specifically associated with contentious politics but also a symbol in (and platform for) lexicons of resistance against "the establishment." With reference to the literature on contentious politics, it could be argued that the protest wall now constitutes a modular performance or generic form of contentious action that can be adapted to a variety of local and social circumstances.⁴⁹ Extending Minna Valjakka's work,⁵⁰ we suggest the generic features of the protest wall as contentious performance include the following:

- **Form:** a collective placement of thoughts and opinions in space;
- **Construction:** spontaneous, during times of contention and with political (rather than artistic) intention;

45 Cohn 2009.

46 See the Democracy Wall that appeared in Xicheng District, Beijing, in 1978–1979 as part of the Beijing Spring.

47 Stempack and Teng 2019.

48 Lam et al. 2019.

49 Nicholls, Miller and Beaumont 2013; Tarrow and Tilly 2007.

50 Valjakka 2020.

- **Location:** prominent public spaces;
- **Authorship:** diverse, open to movement participants and non-participants alike, anonymous;
- **Participation:** voluntary, unscripted;
- **Recognition:** the act of placing opinion in these spaces is recognized as being political by movement claimants, targets and the public alike;
- **Content:** open-ended, diverse.

The signs and symbols that appear on protest walls may differ significantly between countries and movements;⁵¹ so, too, may the methods of expression. It is in these areas that modulation can occur. Context-specific protest repertoires understood and utilized by local actors can be expressed, negotiated and replicated on and through protest walls.

Viewed through the lens of social semiotics, the protest wall represents a set of resources that could constitute a mode as defined by Halliday.⁵² However, further analysis would need to be undertaken to determine whether the signs represented on the wall come together as a semiotic system that articulates something about Hong Kong society, are recognized and understood by the community, and come to display regularity over time.⁵³ The following section explores the Hong Kong-specific semiotic system, which appeared on the Lennon Walls of 2019 and 2020.

Hong Kong-specific semiotic system and movement frames

Not only did the material means of communication retain consistencies between 2014 and 2019 but so did the lexicon of signs. The signifiers and slogans displayed on the Lennon Walls of 2019 were not new: they were drawn from the Umbrella Movement of 2014. In 2014, the political ideals of the prodemocracy camp began to be signified by the colour yellow, the umbrella and characters such as the pig representing the social media platform, LIHK. The values of those in favour of closer ties with China were represented by the internationally recognized signifiers of communism – the colour red and the hammer and sickle. Cultural references to Mao Zedong 毛泽东 and Confucius also regularly appeared in 2014.⁵⁴ This semiotic repertoire was also used regularly on the Lennon Walls of 2019.⁵⁵

Importantly for this paper, in 2019, China was represented by images of Xi Jinping 习近平 in dictatorial poses, Winnie the Pooh, Mao Zedong, also in dictatorial poses, and the hammer and sickle. Hong Kong policemen were frequently depicted as deploying violence towards protesters (261 out of 319 photos, 81.81 per cent). Police were also drawn with canine features such as snouts, fangs and pointed ears (16 out of 319, 5 per cent). In other representations, police were shown as robotic Schutzstaffel (SS) officers (18 out of 319, 5.6 per cent). They were almost exclusively depicted as male, ugly and evil. Finally, Carrie Lam 林鄭月娥 was often portrayed “as herself” with little caricaturing. These representations used unflattering photographs or likenesses of her looking tired, haggard or grumpy (17 out of 123 photos, 13.82 per cent). When caricaturing was employed, Carrie Lam was portrayed as a devil with horns and a trident (46 out of 123, 37.40 per cent) or a puppet of the Chinese government (13 out of 123, 10.57 per cent). In these representations Carrie Lam appeared with her puppeteer – the leader of the Chinese government, Xi Jinping – pulling strings attached to her wrists.⁵⁶

Similarly, movement claimants signified themselves through composition, but replaced parody and caricature with more “life-like” modalities of representation. For example, heroic resistance and diverse

51 Perlin 2015.

52 Halliday 1978.

53 Ibid.

54 Palmer 2020; Valjakka 2020; Veg 2016.

55 Li and Whitworth 2022b.

56 For more on the signs and movement framing found in the discourse of Hong Kong’s 2019 Lennon Walls, see *ibid.*

characters from local and Western popular culture such as the Avengers characters and sites of significance to Hong Kongers such as Lion Rock and the metropolitan skyline of Victoria Harbour.

Frame articulation: diagnostic, prognostic and mobilization frames

The visual cues found on Hong Kong's Lennon Walls in 2019 mainly articulated "diagnostic frames" and, to a lesser degree, "prognostic frames."⁵⁷ The links viewers were encouraged to draw between Xi Jinping and Chairman Mao, the Hong Kong police and SS officers, and Carrie Lam as a puppet collectively, diagnose the Chinese government's rule as authoritarian and its intrusion into Hong Kong as the source of Hong Kong's problems. The few images that attended to prognostic framing depicted the future as bleak if action were not taken.⁵⁸ Mobilizing frames appeared regularly on the Lennon Walls but using the written word rather than visual text. Common slogans included "protect Hong Kong's future," "protect our kids' future," "only with suffrage will Hong Kongers have their own future" and "today you don't stand up, tomorrow you wouldn't have a chance." Here, the concept of a Hong Kong identity being distinct from a Chinese identity was amplified by highlighting values and civic ideals (such as open elections, freedom of speech and the rule of law), cosmopolitanism and diversity.

An important point to note here is that district-specific messages did not feature heavily in the discourse. Slogans, signs, symbols and sentiment remained consistent across the various Lennon Wall sites in Hong Kong. This replication of framing and messaging across districts had the effect of linking diverse populations with different backgrounds. District-based differences were discarded in favour of a collective political, social and spatial unit that transcended the traditional spatial and social boundaries of Hong Kong.⁵⁹

Situating COVID-19 within Hong Kong's contentious political discourse

In response to calls for social distancing following the outbreak of COVID-19, mass protests ceased in Hong Kong. However, fresh opinions about the government continued to appear on the Lennon Walls, including commentary on COVID-19. This is illustrated in [Figure 1](#) and [Figure 2](#).

[Figure 1](#) depicts 18 sheets of A4 paper posted to a pillar in a busy thoroughfare connecting a shopping mall with the local subway station. The panel of nine A4 sheets of paper on the left provides the viewer with detailed information about COVID-19. The panel of nine sheets on the right provides commentary on Hong Kong politics. [Figure 2](#) depicts ten sheets of A4 paper, each containing a political cartoon, pasted close to the ceiling in a busy bus interchange next to the local subway station. The colour and physical condition of the images suggest that all ten had recently been posted there. Eight of these cartoons comment on police brutality and were first seen during the height of the Anti-ELAB Movement, while two comment on the way China dealt with the pandemic and how it "controls" the World Health Organization (WHO).

The placement of commentary on the COVID-19 outbreak on Hong Kong Lennon Walls is significant. Intentionally or otherwise, it causes a process of both physical and ideological "frame articulation." At the most basic level, placing the COVID-19 discourse on the Lennon Walls physically locates it within a space reserved for engagement with political contention. Posting material on a Lennon Wall in and of itself is a deliberate political act. In the Hong Kong context, the act of posting on a Lennon Wall is specifically associated with an ongoing struggle to distinguish Hong Kong identity politically and socially with respect to China. On a more complex level, the placement of discourse on COVID-19 alongside discourse on local Hong Kong politics splices the narratives

⁵⁷ Benford and Snow 2000.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Li and Whitworth 2022a.



Figures 1 and 2: Commentary on COVID-19 Interspersed with Movement Propaganda on the Lennon Walls
 Notes: Photographs taken in Shatin and Tong Chung, March 2020.



Figure 3: Two Side-by-side Images on the Lennon Wall

together, and thus creates new realities, vantage points and possibilities for message interpretation or to guide viewers to particular conclusions. Take, for example, the two images sitting side-by-side in the centre of the top row in Figure 1 (shown separately in Figure 3). Siting the images next to each other encourages viewers to create links between the symbols and meanings contained in both images. The hammer and sickle in the image on the left and the portrait within a rising sun against a red background on the right are likely to signify communism and perhaps authoritarianism for most viewers. The contemporary global audience will understand the figure in the image on the left to be Xi Jinping, the general secretary of the People’s Republic of China. They are also likely to pick up on the intended connotation between the pink nodes extending out of Xi’s head and COVID-19. Combining these signifiers together, the international audience may understand this as a comment on the fact that the first case of COVID-19 was identified in China. The artist, Rebel Pepper, has prominently signed the work. A viewer more deeply initiated in the iconography of Chinese politics may be aware that Rebel Pepper is a pseudonym adopted by a prominent political cartoonist, Wang Liming 王立铭. Wang describes himself as “an exile political cartoonist from

China” who left China out of fears for his safety during government crackdowns on freedom of expression. In this context, the image may also be interpreted as a political comment that likens authoritarianism to a deadly virus.

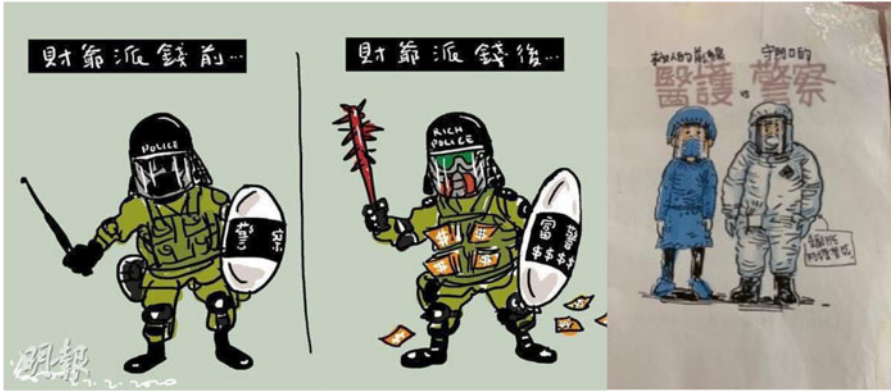
Viewers not familiar with Chinese characters or the iconographic elements linked to Hong Kong politics will be left wondering about the image on the right. Hong Kongers will immediately recognize the bust as a portrait of Chris Tang 鄧炳強, the-then police commissioner of the Hong Kong Police Force. The caption below, “these troubled times chose me,” appropriates a speech given by Chairman Mao. The interaction between the image and words signifies to the local viewer that the police commissioner is authoritarian and undesirable.

The placement of these two images side by side has the effect of amplifying a particular frame as being more salient than others. Links are established between the Hong Kong government and the Chinese leadership through the representation of authoritarianism. Here, authoritarianism is foregrounded and presented as a negative, undesirable attribute – a virus in the cultural politics of the pandemic. This was not an isolated example. The COVID-19 discourse placed on the Lennon Walls replicated specific symbols and ideas popularized during the Anti-ELAB Movement. The following section identifies the symbols that were replicated and suggests that this selective replication served to amplify frames that painted China and the Hong Kong government in a negative light.

Frame amplification: regularities in use of semiotic resources

Commentary on COVID-19 posted on the Lennon Walls made reference to the semiotic resources used to guide viewers’ understanding of key figures – Hong Kong(ers), the Hong Kong government, the Hong Kong police and China – during the Anti-ELAB protests and Umbrella Movement. However, in 2020, after the outbreak of COVID-19, two out of these four represented figures were more frequently replicated and relied upon. Symbols and iconography associated with China and the Hong Kong government frequently reappeared in the discourse on COVID-19, whereas representations of Hong Kong(ers) and Hong Kong police were less prevalent. The amplification of frames for police and Hong Kongers is discussed first before exploring how the COVID-19 discourse replicated semiotic resources established during the 2014 and 2019 movements to amplify the negative diagnostic frames associated with China and the Hong Kong government.

Both images contain iconic elements that are likely to be universally understood. The baton, boots and green fatigues in [Figure 4](#) carry connotations of state violence for most viewers. The blue apron, cap and booties in [Figure 5](#) are easily recognizable symbols associated with the medical profession. However, international audiences may wonder how the images of police personnel and frontline medics are connected. Following the wave of protests that occurred in June and July, additional funds were injected into the Hong Kong police force and 500 new riot suits were purchased from a Chinese manufacturer. This move received wide public criticism and was perceived as symbolic of the government’s desire to suppress civic freedoms and its willingness to use force in the process. Soon after, the image in [Figure 4](#) and others like it appeared. The caption reads “Before the arrival of the money god and after.” The “money god” visited the Hong Kong police again in February 2020, at a time when the number of new COVID-19 cases in Hong Kong was beginning to climb and masks and other PPE for medical personnel and citizens were in short supply. This, too, angered citizens and the government’s priorities were called into question. The caption for the image in [Figure 5](#) reads, “Our frontline medical workers while saving lives vs the cops while guarding doors.” The text in the box on the right draws attention to the fact that the police were provided with full sets of high-tech PPE but medical staff were neglected. Pairing the political context that led to the creation of the image in [Figure 5](#) with the placement of the image on the Lennon Wall, the viewer may be reminded of, or even prompted towards, the collective action frames utilized during the Anti-ELAB Movement to present the police and the Hong Kong government as oppressive.



Figures 4 and 5: References to the Police Found on Lennon Walls before and after COVID-19
 Notes: Photographs taken in Tai Po, November 2019, and Shatin, March 2020.



Figures 6 and 7: Info-graphics Telling People How to Dress in Order to Stay Safe before and after COVID-19
 Notes: Photographs taken in Tai Po, October 2019, and Shatin, March 2020.

Turning now to representations of Hong Kong people that appeared during the social movements of 2014 and 2019 and in the discourse on COVID-19. The COVID-19 discourse that appeared on the Lennon Walls in 2020 made specific reference to this “Hong Kong identity” and the ideals participants seek to associate it with (see Figures 6 and 7). Figure 7 may activate lexicons in the (local) viewer specifically associated with the Umbrella Movement and the Anti-ELAB Movement. The way in which the protective gown, medical mask, goggles and hat have been drawn in Figure 7 very closely resembles the depictions of the raincoat, helmet, goggles and gas mask typically associated with the participants of the Umbrella Movement and the Anti-ELAB Movement. The viewer is further guided towards making a connection between Figure 7 and the discourse that appeared during the Anti-ELAB Movement through the use of colour. Rather than the gown being blue or green – colours more traditionally used to symbolize the medical profession – the gown is yellow, a colour synonymous with Hong Kong’s pro-democracy movement and which references the US suffrage movement of the 1870s.



Figures 8, 9 and 10: China as a Puppeteer before and after COVID-19

Notes: Photographs taken in Kowloon Tong, Tai Po, October 2019, and Tung Chung, April 2020.

Finally, the “info-graphic” construction of the image is reminiscent of images circulated on the Lennon Walls during the protests of 2019 (Figure 6). Each image informs the viewer how to dress appropriately and how to stay safe in two very different contexts: protests against the government and an outbreak of disease.

Amplification of collective action frames associated with China and the Hong Kong government occurred more frequently in the COVID-19 discourse posted on the Lennon Walls in 2020. During the Anti-ELAB Movement, China was often represented by the visual frame of a puppeteer who controlled the Hong Kong government.

The image in Figure 8 appropriates one of the posters used to advertise the 2019 horror film, *Us*. The film chronicles a group of maniacal un-dead who seek to eradicate their living doppelgängers and occupy their place in the world. Casting Xi Jinping in the place of the maniacal un-dead who wears the mask of his living doppelgänger Carrie Lam, suggests to the viewer that the Hong Kong government is but a front for Beijing. The text over the image guides the viewer to an understanding that the future of Hong Kong politics is bleak and horrifying, like the plot of the film.

This visual metaphor framing China/Xi Jinping as a puppeteer was redeployed in the discourse on COVID-19. The images in Figure 10 depict the director-general of the World Health Organization (WHO), Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, as a puppet and a robot controlled by Winnie the Pooh, a popular representation of Xi Jinping. The image on the left of Figure 10 depicts Ghebreyesus tearfully asking Winnie the Pooh (Xi Jinping) for help. The speech bubble reads, “Father Xi, she [Tsai Ing-Wen 蔡英文, the president of Taiwan] discriminated against me and insulted me!” The connotational meaning picked up by the international viewer might relate to assertions that the WHO has not always acted impartially in dealing with the COVID-19 outbreak. Rather, it has been unduly influenced by international politics and the power of China. However, the use of this visual metaphor and familiar depictions of President Xi as Winnie the Pooh amplifies in the Hong Kong viewers’ mind the frames for China developed during the Umbrella Movement and the Anti-ELAB Movement.

During the Umbrella Movement, a commonly used frame presented the Hong Kong political leaders as incapable and unsuitable for office. This frame was also amplified in both the Anti-ELAB discourse and the COVID-19 discourse that appeared on the Lennon Walls, as exemplified in Figures 11–14.

The caption (or linguistic message) associated with the image in Figure 12, for example, adopts language commonly used by the Department of Health on posters reminding people to wash their hands regularly and to “please throw masks into the bin.” This easily recognizable public health directive has been paired with images of John Lee 李家超 (the-then secretary for security), Carrie Lam, and Sophia Chan 陳肇始 (the-then secretary for food and health) in bins. This combination of language and icons appropriates official language in a message that implores citizens to discard the current political leadership. The initiated audience may also recall messages on the Lennon Walls calling for Carrie Lam’s removal from office (Figure 11).



Figures 11 and 12: Political Disapproval of Hong Kong’s Political Leaders before and after COVID-19

Notes: Photographs taken in the University of Hong Kong, November 2019, and Shatin, February 2020.



Figures 13 and 14: Framing of Carrie Lam in Anti-ELAB and COVID-19 Discourses

Notes: Photographs taken in Wong Tai Sin, October 2019, and Shatin, April 2020.

Connections between Figure 13 and Figure 14 can be drawn through their use of similar stylistic elements. In both images, Carrie Lam is shown as viewed through a camera lens in the same hunched posture. Guns feature prominently in the lower half of each image. In Figure 13, Lam has two faces: her “true” face, which exists off-camera and is cold and calculating, and another, which is “turned on” for TV cameras at public relations events. This visual play on the notion of framing reminds the viewer not to be fooled by the “carefully tailored” images shown on TVB (a pro-China news channel, sometimes mocked as “CCTVB”). Figure 14 depicts a device that became a familiar sight in Hong Kong in the months following the outbreak of COVID-19, the infrared thermometer gun. At first glance, the thermometer reading looks like it is displaying an error message, suggesting that Carrie Lam is faulty in some way. However, On9 has a specific meaning in Cantonese: “ignorant and stupid.” Thus, Figures 13 and 14 amplify the negative frames used to present Carrie Lam and mobilize sentiment against her among Hong Kong viewers.

Discussion and Conclusion

From the perspective of social semiotics, the protest wall's status as a modular performance, as defined by Charles Tilly, is significant, as it confirms a set of special practices as a widely understood set of semiotic resources.⁶⁰ With specific reference to Hong Kong, the reappearance and consistency of signifiers such as the colour yellow, umbrellas, black shirts, lion rock, Chairman Mao and the hammer and sickle (among others) on Hong Kong's Lennon Walls across the contentious events of 2014 and 2019, and then again in commentary on COVID-19, suggests the emergence of a semiotic system that is easily recognizable to the Hong Kong community and which has come to display regularities in use across events. Therefore, the Lennon Walls of Hong Kong can be seen as a semiotic mode with specific modal affordances. Only certain messages – those protesting against the establishment – can be communicated through the walls.⁶¹ Thus, although almost all Hong Kongers will be familiar with the language of the Lennon Walls, only those who support the movement's aims will speak it. In this sense, communicating through this particular semiotic mode became a weapon in everyday resistance.

In relation to social movement studies, the placement of images commenting on COVID-19 on the Hong Kong Lennon Walls and the use of local lexicons specifically associated with Hong Kong's contentious politics represented a deliberate utilization of existing semiotic resources and thus situated the discourse on COVID-19 firmly within Hong Kong's protest lexicon, both physically and figuratively. Images and symbols from Hong Kong's political movements were spliced together with selective commentary on the pandemic in a way that creates new connections and alignments between events. The redeployment of existing semiotic resources in the articulation of frames for COVID-19 bled into frame amplification. As images, sentiments and messages of Hong Kong's contentious politics were refracted through the COVID-19 discourse, some frames shone through more strongly. Replicating the symbols and visual metaphors for China and the Hong Kong administration that were popularized during the Umbrella and the Anti-ELAB Movements amplified the Anti-ELAB Movement messaging associated with these figures. The depiction of COVID-19 emphasized not only the importance of professional knowledge but also the reassertion of an ethos of responsibility and civic-based identification within the local community.⁶²

To conclude by echoing Barthes, the placement of images and the context-specific knowledge viewers use to interpret images are crucial in the generation of meaning and collective action frames.⁶³ Images that portray China as the origin of COVID-19 or the controller of the WHO may strengthen connotational links between COVID-19 as “the China virus”; however, for people located in Hong Kong, the virus, interpreted through the medium of Lennon Walls, took on an additional dimension deeply connected to local politics and which sought to reflect, amplify and mobilize citizens' political sentiments and identities. In this regard, COVID-19 became a new frame in the contentious mobilization in Hong Kong that mobilized citizens' political identity against both the Chinese and local Hong Kong governments.

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⁶⁰ Tilly 2008.

⁶¹ Li and Whitworth 2022b.

⁶² Veg 2017.

⁶³ Barthes 1977.

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