Women Politicians, Social Movements, and Misogyny in Democratic Struggles

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Abstract

In this essay, I investigate the relationship among women in politics, social movements, and misogyny through an examination of public discourse surrounding women politicians—in particular, Carrie Lam, the former chief executive of Hong Kong. The participants in a series of protests in Hong Kong against an anti-extradition bill that began in 2019 generated a large volume of audiovisual materials for the purpose of raising social consciousness, conducting civic education, and creating networks for solidarity. Many of these protest materials contained blatantly misogynistic messages targeting pro-establishment women politicians. I focus on women leaders to explore gender politics in social movements. In assessing the public discourse about Lam during the 2019 movement, I demonstrate that gender politics is consistently inscribed within social movements in postcolonial Hong Kong, in which context the progressive pursuit of democracy, self-determination, and freedom remains imbued with patriarchal culture, including paternalism. This patriarchal culture, unsurprisingly, combines seamlessly with sexism, misogyny, and a gendered imagination of the city's possible political futures.

Keywords: women politicians, social movement, misogyny, gender politics, democracy

In this essay, I analyze the gendered dynamics of social movements from the perspective of public discourse about women politicians. I focus on the discourses in various forms of media about Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor while she was serving as chief executive of Hong Kong to reveal the complexity and nuances that characterized this nexus of gender, misogyny, and pro-democracy social movements. The Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill (Anti-ELAB) Movement took shape in opposition to a proposal that the Hong Kong government issued in February 2019 titled the Fugitive Offenders and Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters Legislation (Amendment) Bill, which would allow the transfer of fugitives to jurisdictions with which the city had no extradition agreement, including mainland China and Taiwan. Mass protests against the bill began in the summer as a result of growing concern about unjust, politically motivated trials and persecution of Hong Kong citizens on the mainland. The initial goal was the withdrawal of the proposed bill, but the demonstrations soon expanded and evolved into a prolonged movement seeking democratic reform of Hong Kong's political system.

In a series of protests, the participants generated a large volume of textual and visual materials for the purpose of raising social consciousness, conducting civic education, and creating networks for solidarity. My focus in this essay is on the protester-created materials, including texts, images, and videos, that contained blatantly misogynistic messages targeting women politicians with epithets such as "slut," "bitch," and "communist pussy." This messaging intensified after Lam addressed the protests for the first time in a teary TV interview using the relationship between mothers and their children as a metaphor, explaining that she would not "spoil" the citizens by giving them what they wanted—that is, the withdrawal of the bill. Lam perhaps intended to portray herself as "a-mother-of-the-city" figure to humanize the contentious politics and show her concern for Hong Kong's future, but there was a powerful backlash against the patronizing tone of her motherly love narrative. Protesters chanted "Carrie Lam, you are not my mother" and

"citizens are not your children" during demonstrations and created countless flyers, posters, memes, drawings, Post-it notes, and so on in the streets as well as on the internet, in which they attacked her for being a woman as well as for her political stance. These materials document a unique moment for gender politics during Hong Kong's democratic struggles.

In what follows, I first contextualize these events by drawing on the scholarship on gender and feminist studies, with a particular focus on women in politics in Hong Kong and the scholarship on the relationships among social movements, feminist movements, and patriarchal political culture in the city. I then discuss the public responses to Lam's portrayal of herself as a maternal figure during the interview. My particular concern is with the instrumental use of the rhetoric of "loving mother(s) of the city" by both Lam and the public as a fresh iteration of patriarchy, in the former case, to support paternal authoritarianism and justify police violence and, in the latter case, to support the pro-democracy movement. Next, I unpack the gender stereotyping and misogyny in protester-generated materials targeting Lam specifically as a woman and a politician.[1] My primary interest here is in undemocratic practices and tactics involving sexism, slut-shaming, misogyny, harassment, and other forms of gender-based abuse that have been legitimized in a movement dedicated to the pursuit of justice and democracy and, in turn, the possible effects of gendering social movements.

1. With the help of my research assistants, I collected a large volume of protest materials produced roughly from the beginning of the movement until early February 2020, when the outbreak of the COVID-19 epidemic halted social and political gatherings. I made multiple visits to various protests and demonstration sites, gathering leaflets and posters and photographing on-site visual arts. In many cases, on the way to these sites, posters and videos were airdropped to my phone, and I saved them for the analysis presented in this essay. Similarly, my research assistants and I have joined multiple online groups on Facebook and Telegram and regularly visited the discussion forum HKGolden.com, where abundant materials about the movement were created and circulated. These spaces not only provide a plethora of protest materials that include gendered discourses but also contextualize them in terms of the discursive formation of the movement.

The Democratic Struggles and Changing Gender Landscape in Hong Kong

Hong Kong's social and political movements date back to the colonial era, and grassroots-led movements in particular seeking justice and democratic governance have a long history in the city.[2] In the guise of cultural preservation, the British adopted a noninterventionist strategy throughout the colonial era, which meant endorsing or refraining from meddling with social structures that substantially strengthened the de facto patriarchy in Hong Kong society. Through the co-optation of local male elites, the colonial state's main public policies, actions, and inactions created and enforced gendered effects, subordinating women, enforcing familism, and thereby depriving women of a voice and participation in political life.[3] The postwar era witnessed a dramatic shift in the social and economic landscape with the emergence of a prosperous industrial and capitalist economy and widespread educational access. These developments provided women with a limited number of but crucial opportunities for employment, career advancement, and class mobility. To be clear, the success of Hong Kong's postwar industrial and capitalist development is undeniably attributable to the labor of young working women as well as women in domestic spaces who undergirded its social production and reproduction.[4] These opportunities fostered a nascent feminist consciousness and activism that played a

2. Stephen Wing-kai Chiu and Dale Lü, eds. *The Dynamics of Social Movement in Hong Kong. Hong Kong Culture and Society* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2000); Ngok Ma, *Political Development in Hong Kong: State, Political Society, and Civil Society* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2007).
3. Eliza W. Y. Lee, ed., *Gender and Change in Hong Kong: Globalization, Postcolonialism, and Chinese Patriarchy* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2003); Adelyn Lim, "The Hong Kong Women's Movement: Toward a Politics of Difference and Diversity," in *Women's Movements in Asia: Feminisms and Transnational Activism*, ed. Mina Roces and Louise P. Edwards (New York: Routledge, 2010), 144–65.
4. Stephen Wing-Kai Chiu and Ching-Kwan Lee, "Withering Away of the Hong Kong Dream? Women Workers under Industrial Restructuring," in *Gender and Change in Hong Kong: Globalization, Postcolonialism, and Chinese Patriarchy*, ed. Eliza W. Y. Lee

substantial role in the ongoing struggle for autonomy and liberty, as was evident in high-profile events such as the so-called 1967 riots and the intense civil engagement in the Sino-British negotiation of the handover in the 1980s.[5]

With the signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984, according to which Hong Kong was to be transferred to Chinese control on July 1, 1997, the city entered a transitional phase during which women, as a social force, started to seek a postcolonial identity through organizing and mobilization. As Eliza Lee pointed out, "The rise of an indigenous women's movement in the 1980s was part of the postcoloniality," for the movement was integrated into "colonial resistance, reflection on one's Chinese identity, and the formation of a local Hong Kong identity."[6] Women's groups and grassroots organizations multiplied locally, and their members looked into ways to make sure that postcolonial institutions that impacted different facets of women's lives could incorporate gender issues such as marriage, the elimination of concubinage, equal pay for equal labor, abortion rights, maternity leave, and land inheritance rights.[7] Of course, women's groups are not monolithic: pro-People's Republic of China (PRC) women's organizations that oppose democratic reform and support the integration of local identities into a national Chinese identity have coexisted with grassroots-oriented, rights-based women's organizations that support

(Vancouver: UBC Press, 2003), 97–132; Ching Kwan Lee, *Gender and the South China Miracle: Two Worlds of Factory Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

5. Gary Ka-wai Cheung, *Hong Kong's Watershed: The 1967 Riots* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009); Gina Anne Tam, "Democracy in Hong Kong: The Benefit of a Gender Mainstreaming Approach" (Washington, DC: Wilson China Fellowship, 2023).
6. Lee, *Gender and Change in Hong Kong*, 13.
7. Po-king Choi, "The Women's Movement and Local Identity in Hong Kong," in *Hong Kong Reintegrating with China: Political, Cultural and Social Dimensions*, ed. Pui-tak Lee (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2001), 219–38; Ching Kwan Lee, "Public Discourses and Collective Identities: Emergence of Women as a Collective Actor in the Women's Movement in Hong Kong," in *The Dynamics of Social Movement in Hong Kong*, ed. Stephen W. K. Chiu and Tai Lok Lui (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2000), 227–57.

democratization and gender equality but tend to be more concerned with maintaining a liberal civil society than seeking political power.[8] Furthermore, political reform that expands women's access to political participation through appointment or election to public office has improved civic society and raised the profile of women's issues on the political agenda of the city.[9] Hong Kong's first woman legislator, Ellen Li, elected in 1965, was a member of the local Chinese elites who had founded the first women's organization, the Hong Kong Council of Women, in 1947. More women sought political power and representation in the Hong Kong polity thereafter. In the late days of the colonial period, three influential women, Anna Wu, Emily Lau, and Christine Loh, served simultaneously on the city's most powerful lawmaking body, the Legislative Council (LegCo).[10] High-profile women leaders have served in various political positions since the handover in 1997. Earlier, before Carrie Lam, Anson Chan had a long career as a civil servant, retiring in 1993 after serving as chief secretary for administration, the second highest position in the government, paving the way for Lam to serve as the first female chief executive.

Over the years, whereas women have become more active in the city's political life and public affairs, the number of women holding public posts has still remained fairly small. For example, elected women legislators made up 19 percent of the LegCo in 2021 compared to 5.1 percent in 1991, but they were still far below the 81 percent of male politicians in the same

8. Lim, "The Hong Kong Women's Movement."
9. Adelyn Lim, *Transnational Feminism and Women's Movements in Post-1997 Hong Kong: Solidarity beyond the State* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2015); Louise de Rosario, "A Woman's Place: For Three, It's in Hong Kong's Legislature—Making Waves," *Far Eastern Economic Review* 158 (1995): 60–61; Gender Research Center, *Research on Public Perceptions of Female Political Leaders* (Hong Kong: Equal Opportunities Commission; Chinese University of Hong Kong, October 2020), https://www.eoc.org.hk/EOC/upload/ResearchReport/20210412/4_ResearchReport_CHI_final.pdf.
10. de Rosario, "A Woman's Place."

role.[11] A number of factors contribute to the continued underrepresentation of women in Hong Kong politics, including sexism and gender stereotyping inherent in a historically male-dominated political culture, the colonial legacy of condoning patriarchal institutions, the Beijing authority's reinforcement of authoritarian parental governance, familial duties, and sociocultural expectations for women politicians. These elements, together with liberal Western political ideologies, have contributed to the governing styles and strategies in Hong Kong politics, including the ways in which women politicians perform themselves and are covered by the media. Scholars found that there were notable differences in the speaking styles of pro-establishment leader Carrie Lam and pro-democratic, former Democratic Party chairperson Emily Lau Wai-hing.[12] When advocating for the Western practice of universal suffrage, Lau used a utilitarian discourse, but Lam used a Confucianist discourse and a consensus-driven style. The persistent influence of familism and patriarchal culture is also reflected in the media coverage of women politicians. Hong Kong media tended to portray female officials as "perfect women"—that is, as powerful political figures who are also excellent wives, mothers, and daughters—a portrayal that would advance their careers without challenging the institutionalized inequality in the family.[13]

11. Gender Research Center, "Research on Public Perceptions of Female Political Leaders," 13; Women's Commission, *Hong Kong Women in Figures 2021* (Hong Kong: Women's Commission, 2021), 53, http://www.women.gov.hk/download/research/HK_Women2021_e.pdf.
12. Wei Feng and Doreen Wu, "Discourses of Female Leaders in Postcolonial Hong Kong," in *Discourse, Politics and Women as Global Leaders*, ed. John Wilson and Diana Boxer (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing, 2015), 251–72, https://doi.org/10.1075/dapsac.63.
13. Francis L. F. Lee, "Constructing Perfect Women: The Portrayal of Female Officials in Hong Kong Newspapers," *Media, Culture & Society* 26, no. 2 (March 2004): 207–25, https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443704041173.

Gendering Social Movement: Sexism, Patriarchal Values, and Misogyny

Hong Kong's social movements, like many democratic movements worldwide, have usually included few women in leadership roles and shown the influence of a common patriarchal culture that pressures women activists to refrain from calling for gender equality among other democratic demands that prioritize direct elections. In the 1980s, women's groups and organizations began to push for democratic reforms. The women leaders of these organizations had to be very careful when bringing up women's issues not to be considered divisive and distracting attention from democratic movements, led mostly by men, that had consistently overlooked gender equality as if it were a natural byproduct of democracy.[14] This predicament stems in part from the dearth of women leaders in social movements who can champion gender issues and the belief that equal rights and women's concerns are secondary to the democratic agenda promoted by male leaders and broadly supported by the public, not just in Hong Kong. In *The Will to Change*, bell hooks wrote of male activists in the United States, "Many of these men were radical thinkers who participated in movements for social justice, speaking out on behalf of the workers, the poor, speaking out on behalf of racial justice. However, when it came to the issue of gender they were as sexist as their conservative cohorts."[15] Similarly, renowned Japanese feminist scholar-activist Ueno Chizuko described becoming a feminist in the context of the worldwide anti-war movement of the 1960s and the sociocultural and political situation in Japan, where progressive male activists belittled women who participated in the movement, treating them as objects of desire rather

14. Tam, "Democracy in Hong Kong," 377. Dee also Laiching Leung, "The Women's Movement Is the Democracy Movement [Funü yundong jiushi minzhu yundong]," in *Oral Histories of Hong Kong's 1980s Democracy Movement* [*Xianggang 80 niandai minzhu yundong koushu lishi*], ed. Ngok Ma (Hong Kong: City University Press, 2012), 112–25.
15. bell hooks, *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love* (New York: Atria Books, 2004), 109.

than equal partners in the struggle for justice and democracy.[16] Feminism and pro-democracy movements have a bad romance: toxic masculinity, rape culture, sexism, gender stereotyping, and misogyny all find their ways into these movements.

There is an expanding body of scholarship on violence against women in politics (VAWIP), which includes acts or threats of violence "resulting in physical, psychological, or symbolic harm or suffering to women involved in, or associated with, politics."[17] Since social movements represent an extreme form of politics, VAWIP, for both protesters and political leaders, looms large. The expansion of social movements facilitated by technology and digital activism creates, facilitates, and exacerbates the problems of toxic masculinity, sexism, misogyny, and patriarchy, shaping a manosphere that weaves an intersectional web of oppressions confronted by women and other minorities.[18] The 2014 Occupy Central movement (also known as the Umbrella Movement) has witnessed the significant roles that women played as protesters, supporters, political opponents, and so on.[19] However, sexism has always been part of the movement, and the women participants in which suffered not only verbal threats but also physical violence and

16. Ueno, Chizuko. *Feminism from Scratch* [*Cong ling kaishi de nvxing zhuyi*] (Beijing: Beijing United Publishing, 2021), 59–65.
17. Rebecca Kuperberg, "Intersectional Violence against Women in Politics," *Politics & Gender* 14, no. 4 (December 2018): 686, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X18000612.
18. Lisa Sugiura, *The Incel Rebellion: The Rise of the Manosphere and the Virtual War against Women* (Leeds: Emerald Publishing, 2021); Alice E. Marwick and Robyn Caplan, "Drinking Male Tears: Language, the Manosphere, and Networked Harassment," *Feminist Media Studies* 18, no. 4 (July 2018): 543–59, https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2018.1450568; Emma Grey Ellis, "Reddit's 'Manosphere' and the Challenge of Quantifying Hate," Wired, July 10, 2019, https://www.wired.com/story/misogyny-reddit-research/.
19. Lily Kuo and Heather Timmons, "The Umbrella Movement Marks a Coming of Age for Hong Kong's 'Princess' Generation," Quartz, November 14, 2014, https://qz.com/285345/the-umbrella-movement-marks-a-coming-of-age-for-hong-kongs-princess-generation.

emotional abuse in the street and online that infringed on their rights as citizens to speak freely, assemble, and protest.[20]

Both anti-democratic forces such as the police and pro-establishment and pro-democracy protesters harassed the women participants in the movement, though for different reasons, subjecting them to violent sexism, misogyny, and discrimination on various fronts. The situation was even worse during the 2019 Anti-ELAB Movement, when both the protesters and the police turned to violence. On the one hand, women protesters were trolled online and in the street. Wherever the movement advanced, the social resentment and anger toward police violence, sexual assault, and the abuse of protesters, largely women, intensified and exacerbated. In August 2019, the Women's Coalition on Equal Opportunities organized the #ProtestToo demonstration as a response to the police abuse of protesters. Sociologist Ruby Lai considered this rare example of #MeToo-style activism a convergence of the unfulfilled anti-sexual violence agenda in the city and political demands of the 2019 pro-democracy movement, which demonstrates the government withdrawal of commitment to combat sexual violence as it perceives it as a direct threat to its authority.[21] The campaign thus testified the extreme difficulties in pursuing legal action against police violence, with many reports and allegations of sexual assault being dismissed by the same police force responsible for the violence. On the other hand, women who joined in the struggle on the front lines faced backlash as a result of gender stereotyping in the form of masculine notions of physicality and violence, for their participation called into question the gendered boundary that demarcated the front lines as a male domain. While scholars have

20. "Hong Kong: Women and Girls Attacked as Police Fail to Protect Peaceful Protesters—Amnesty International," Amnesty International, October 3, 2014, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2014/10/hong-kong-women-and-girls-attacked-police-fail-protect-peaceful-protesters/.

21. Ruby Y. S. Lai, "From #MeToo to #ProtestToo: How a Feminist Movement Converged with a Pro-Democracy Protest in Hong Kong," *Politics & Gender* 17, no. 3 (September 2021): 504–5, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X21000246.

emphasized that the leaderless nature of the movement had the potential to empower women to cross this gendered boundary,[22] the stereotyping and sexist culture remained prevalent despite the progressive agendas of such collective actions. As media scholar Gina Marchetti acutely pointed out, while the installation and removal of the "Goddess of Democracy," an idealized female icon, attracted a great deal of attention, "actual women on the streets, not Westernized abstractions of a vaguely articulated concept, seldom receive the same heroic treatment as their male counterparts."[23]

In addition, the slogans, mottos, and images, as the discursive terrain of these movements, perpetrated and propagated the language and imagery of sexism and misogyny despite the goal of securing social justice, liberty, and democracy. A notable case is the phrase "freedom hi" (自由閪), which combines "freedom" and vulgar Cantonese slang "hai"—phonetically similar to the English word "hi," thus hailing "freedom" into being—what Althusser called "interpellation"[24]—popularized in the 2019 movement. Because "hai" in Cantonese originally refers to the vagina and later was appropriated to describe a "loser" or "retard," the misogynistic meaning of the word reflects the conventional and (un)consciousness linguistic practices in social movements and common speech that foster patriarchy by demeaning women in general. These discursive and affective practices, as some scholars and commentators acutely contested, reckon a populist and right-wing rise in Hong Kong movements, where far-rightists "regularly traffic in discriminatory rhetoric toward women and minorities, espousing a witty and

22. Susanne Yp Choi, "Doing and Undoing Gender: Women on the Frontline of Hong Kong's Anti-Extradition Bill Movement," *Social Movement Studies* 22, no. 5–6 (2023): 786–801, https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2022.2086114.
23. Gina Marchetti, "Hong Kong as Feminist Method: Gender, Sexuality, and Democracy in Two Documentaries by Tammy Cheung," in *Hong Kong Culture and Society in the New Millennium*, ed. Yiu-Wai Chu (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2017), 63, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-3668-2.
24. Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 142–76.

controversial tone to make deeply reactionary politics palatable to a Hong Kong audience."[25]

Most of the scholarship on women and social movements has focused on the impact of women's participation, though the recent surge in far-right movements has attracted the attention of academia and the public to the vital role that women have been performing in conservative activism worldwide.[26] The present study contributes to the literature on gender stereotyping and the political barriers that women face in social movements by exploring the discourse about pro-establishment women leaders. The analysis of the public discourse surrounding women politicians, particularly former chief executive Carrie Lam, during the Anti-ELAB Movement demonstrates the consistently large influence of gender politics on social movements, where progressive pursuits of democracy, self-determination, and freedom are haunted relentlessly by patriarchal culture, working unsurprisingly seamlessly with sexism, misogyny, and gendered imagination of political futures.

Playing the "Mother Card": Women Politicians, Paternal Governance, and Gendered Language

In her capacity as the leading politician in Hong Kong, Carrie Lam initially refused to engage directly with the Anti-ELAB Protesters and persisted in advancing the bill. On June 12, 2019, after a series of violent clashes between the protesters and the police, Lam appeared in the TV interview

25. Promise Li, "It's Time for Hong Kong to Reckon with Its Far-Right," *Lausan Collective* (blog), November 29, 2020, https://lausancollective.com/2020/hong-kong-reckon-with-far-right/. See also Wen Liu, J. N. Chien, Christina Chung, and Ellie Tse, eds., *Reorienting Hong Kong's Resistance: Leftism, Decoloniality, and Internationalism* (Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore, 2022), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-4659-1.

26. See Eviane Leidig, *The Women of the Far Right: Social Media Influencers and Online Radicalization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023).

described previously to address the protests for the first time and, in doing so, invoked the parenting analogy: "To use a metaphor: I'm a mother too; I have two sons. If I let him have his way every time my son acts this way, I believe we will have a good relationship in the short term. But if I indulge his wayward behavior, he might regret it after he grows up. He will then ask me: 'Mum, why didn't you remind me back then?'"[27] At another moment, addressing the protesters' accusations that she was "betraying Hong Kong," Lam tearfully spoke of her love for the city and recalled that her husband had teased her for "selling herself to Hong Kong." Lam thus presented herself as a mother disciplining her children with tears and care, using unconventional political rhetoric rooted in paternalism and familism.

To understand the obstacles faced by women politicians in Hong Kong, scholars such as Catherine Ng and Evelyn Ng cautioned that, while the image of a "carer" can be politically advantageous for women in some respects, they should not "over-subscribe to a discourse that emphasises their identity as 'citizen–the carer' at the expense of their political image as leaders who care."[28] Managing the fine line between "a caring politician" and "a caring mother" requires great skills as women navigate parties and political machinery that remain male-dominated. Lam's political discourse and speech were not particularly feminine—instead, as mentioned, manifesting a Confucianist style of consensus-building between the citizens of Hong Kong and the Chinese central government.[29]

Lam's public acknowledgment of the protests with the teary parenting analogy was widely criticized and greeted with sneers and sarcasm because of her patronizing tone. Protesters organized for the specific purpose of

27. "Carrie Lam Addresses Extradition Law Controversy," *South China Morning Post*, June 12, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HhgR6dCjKvg&ab_channel=SouthChinaMorningPost.
28. Catherine W. Ng and Evelyn G. H. Ng, "The Politics of Care and Female District Councillors in Hong Kong," *Asian Journal of Social Science* 36, no. 5 (2008): 770, https://doi.org/10.1163/156853108X364217.
29. Feng and Wu, "Discourses of Female Leaders."

Figure 7.1 A poster contrasting Carrie Lam, described as "the benevolent mom," heedless of police beating protesters outside her window, with a woman described as "the rioter" crying before a line of riot police in full gear.
Source: Author's archive

responding to Lam's claim to be the mother of the city as justification for police violence and created artwork that addressed the motherly love discourse. One widely circulated poster (figure 1) contrasted Lam, as she was sitting inside for the TV interview where she gave the parenting analogy, with a middle-aged woman confronting the riot police. The middle-aged

woman was apparently referred to as the one who was captured in a viral video as she wept and begged police to release young protesters, since she, as a mother, understood how their mothers felt.[30] In the poster, the description of Lam as "the benevolent mother" and the woman confronting police as "the rioter" is, of course, ironic. Multiple versions of the poster were disseminated widely online during various demonstrations as memes that shared the theme of contrasting the motherly love that Lam utilized as a political strategy to denounce the protests and legitimate her rule with the love of the benevolent and caring woman supporting young people in a justice-seeking movement.

Two days after Lam's TV interview, on June 14, 2019, more than six thousand people, most of them mothers according to the organizers, gathered in the Chater Garden in the Central District, one of Hong Kong's busiest business districts, to rally in opposition to the government and police violence against protesters. Calling themselves "Hong Kong mothers," the participants staged a sit-in, many of them waving banners and posters reading "DON'T SHOOT OUR KIDS!," "Child, you are not a rioter, you're a child of HK," and "Walking with the youth."

In analyzing Lam's motherly love discourse, Ting Guo argued perceptively that it appropriates the paternalistic and authoritarian governing style of Beijing.[31] The "leader as mother" theme sheds light on the appeal of gender stereotypes to a form of governance centered on the Confucian tradition of order, paternalism, and familism. Guo sharply contested that the deployment of this discourse in Hong Kong's political culture is thus an outgrowth of the colonial patriarchy and familial nationalism

30. Emily Lo and Kayla Wong, "A Diverse Cross-Section of Hong Kong Took Part in Protests. These Are Some of the People," Mothership, June 18, 2019, https://mothership.sg/2019/06/who-took-part-hong-kong-protests/; "Anti-ELAB: Over 6000 Hong Kong Mothers Rally to Support Anti-ELAB Movement," *Hong Kong Economic Times*, June 14, 2019, https://topick.hket.com/article/2377143.

31. Ting Guo, "'So Many Mothers, So Little Love': Discourse of Motherly Love and Parental Governance in 2019 Hong Kong Protests," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 34, no. 1–2 (November 15, 2021): 3–24, https://doi.org/10.1163/15700682-12341528.

that gendered the social movement and serves to dismiss time-honored practices in civic society and the potential for democracy thereafter and to justify government violence as a kind of parenting for the betterment of the citizen-children. Yet, while the mothers' rally was momentous, like the later #ProtestToo, its moment was short-lived and its success was a mirage. Notably, the protesters—from the middle-aged woman captured on the viral video pleading with the police to stop firing tear gas to the protesters to the participants in the mass sit-in and a group of fathers who initiated an online petition to support their children involved in the movement[32]—used the same language of parental love in the context of political conflict. By employing this discourse, the protesters, while not actively embracing paternalism, did nothing to reject it.[33]

It is in this respect that parental governance has had the greatest influence on Hong Kong's political struggle over democracy, for the framework of civil society sits uneasily with the Confucian ideologies that are deeply intertwined in the prevailing political philosophy and buttress the governing logic and hegemony. In seeking to identify the "real" mother of Hong Kong, the anti-authoritarian political protest reimagined parental and familial relationships so that women, be they politicians or the mothers of protesters, served as the locus of discursive politics.

Moreover, whereas Lam's narrative of motherly love was contested, and popular memes contrasted her with other Hong Kong mothers, as discussed, profane and vulgar language about her associated with the motherly love rhetoric was highly visible. The verbal harassment of Lam in flyers and posters included taunts in the form of "X your mother," in which *X* is equitable to the English obscenity "fuck," thus the whole phrase is a violent form of gendered language. For example, one such flyer shows Lam's image being digitally modified with two big cross marks on the eyes to symbolize

32. "Anti-ELAB: A Group of Fathers Initiated an Online Petition to Walk with Their Children, Attending the Demonstration on Father's Day to Protest Hong Kong," *Hong Kong Economic Times*, June 14, 2019, https://topick.hket.com/article/2376801.

33. Guo, "'So Many Mothers.'"

blindness and the hammer and sickle symbol on her forehead referring to the Communist Party of China. The image was drawn based on a still depicting Lam at a press conference to announce that "the bill is dead" and the flyer includes the phrase "dead your mother" that plays on both her announcement and conventional Cantonese slang for "motherfucking." In another poster, Lam's head was digitally transplanted onto the body of a woman depicted as a knife-thrower's assistant strapped to a large circular target. The slogan in the poster, "divide your mother"—a combination of the protesters' principles of "don't split, don't divide, don't snitch on anyone," which are written below on the poster, and the slang term "motherfucking"—covers much of the poster against a gray background.

These protest materials naturally propagate sexism and misogyny.[34] The consequences here are twofold. First, the phrase "X your mother" is sexist and playful, serving as a reminder that women have played a part in the conventions and norms relating to vulgar language that objectifies them in sexist and/or sexualized ways to express men's, and also women's, lust and anger. More importantly, the legitimization of such expressions falls under the illusion of free speech; therefore, it is anger combined with the fear of losing it, looming large in the social movement context. Second, the fact that such vulgar language frequently occurred in the movement, as it does in daily life, is evidence of the normalization of sexism in language and the hegemonic power of misogyny. As media critics forcefully argued, "What makes 'Your Mom' jokes sexist—and what makes it difficult for us to see them as such—is the deeply internalized misogyny at the heart of the patriarchal structures and belief systems on which these jokes hinge."[35]

34. Deborah Cameron, *Language, Sexism and Misogyny* (London: Routledge, 2023).
35. Kayla Kibb, "Unpacking the Obvious, if Oft-Overlooked Misogyny of the 'Your Mom' Joke," InsideHook, May 6, 2021, https://www.insidehook.com/culture/misogyny-your-mom-joke.

Social Movements and Regressive Gender Politics

Like misogyny, the paternalism in the movement might be considered merely instrumental, a political tactic. I stress that not everyone embraced the parent-child framework in thinking about and discussing the political struggle in Hong Kong. In particular, the "citizens are not your children" slogan was a call to reject paternal governance in civil society. However, this rejection reveals another set of contradictions. In their efforts to reject the narrative of "mother" and the depiction of a politician as a maternal figure, the protesters clearly distinguished democracy and civil society from the paternal authoritarianism rooted in the Confucian world order and interpersonal relationships. Nonetheless, when civic society was invoked, misogyny and sexist barriers against women in democratic struggles were also engendered, as the analysis of the profanity directed at Lam partially demonstrates. In many cases, much of the art associated with the protests targeted her gender, familial duties, appearance, and sexuality.

Of course, women politicians have long been judged and objectified because of their gender. Many of the discourses and practices centered on the interplay of *femininity* and *capacity* in politics. Because women possess "natural-born" characteristics such as being caring, nurturing, and cooperative, the argument goes, they lack the capacity to engage in politics since successful politicians display, to the contrary, assertiveness, courage, willfulness, toughness, and even ruthlessness. This supposedly time-honored incompatibility between feminine traits and politics provides an explanation for why men have dominated the field. While gender stereotyping in politics has been challenged as increasing numbers of women participate in formal politics and hold senior political offices, women politicians have also been associated with ostensibly feminine concerns such as welfare, schools, the family, and health care.[36] The symbolic representation of women in politics,

36. Ng and Ng, "The Politics of Care."

to use feminist political theorist Anne Phillips's phrase, has to change if political structures are to cease being patriarchal and sexist.[37]

It remains a common practice for women who are vying for leadership positions to downplay their femininity and assert their capacity to engage in politics. In other words, many of them display characteristics that are associated with men so as to be seen as equally qualified and capable as politicians. Examples include some of the most influential women leaders worldwide, such as former UK prime minister Margaret Thatcher, known as the "Iron Lady," and former German chancellor Angela Merkel. Likewise, Lam's political persona strategically emphasized Confucian familism over femininity or sensitivity.[38] Therefore, when her teary interview was broadcast, many members of the public considered it clumsy.[39]

Similarly, efforts to disqualify women politicians involve both questioning their capacity and attacking their feminine traits. In Lam's case, on the one hand, protesters created materials that targeted her elite status and, in turn, her political agenda and policy practices that did not enjoy broad public support. For example, after the TV interview aired, some of the protesters' art directly addressed her record, suggesting that she was incapable of being an effective political leader. Drawings and text-based memes accused her of abusing her power on the grounds that, at a time when her son was bullied in Hong Kong schools, she took a diplomatic position that involved relocating to London and brought him with her to be educated in the United Kingdom. The accusation focused on her supposed use of taxpayers' money to take care of the son (since the government is largely supported by tax revenues), which was interpreted as evidence of corruption because, having failed to show herself capable of taking care of Hong Kong's children by responding to their demands for democracy, she claimed to serve as the

37. Anne Phillips, *The Politics of Presence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 27–56.
38. Guo, "'So Many Mothers.'"
39. Luisa Tam, "Carrie Lam's Clumsy Parenting Analogy Was Designed to Take Sting Out of Extradition Bill Protests, but Only Burns Relations with Hong Kong Mothers," *South China Morning Post*, June 17, 2019. https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/society/article/3014863/carrie-lams-clumsy-parenting-analogy-was-designed-take-sting.

mother of the city. I draw attention in this context to one of the airdropped images that I received when taking the subway to a protest site, which shows Lam stopping at a subway gate by a turnstile. The image was of an incident in 2017 when, having recently been elected to the position of chief executive, she was filmed at a turnstile apparently unaware of how to use it.[40] As a result, she was subject to public derision and questions regarding her ability to govern the city with "down-to-earth" considerations and policies. The reference to the incident in the art of the protesters thus called into question her capability as a woman leader.

On the other hand, Lam was subjected to repeated gender-based attacks in the form of slut shaming and other sexist slurs. This long-standing tactic is based on sexist assumptions and misrepresentations—intentional or not—of women's sexuality. While the harassment of politicians online and offline is a serious problem in politics generally, it is particularly acute for women politicians because misogynistic and sexist discourse has the potential to discourage women from entering the political arena, with the result that they are underrepresented in politics.[41] In 2016, when Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump were the leading candidates for the US presidency, the public discourse was replete with sexual objectification of the former while the latter had a long record of ridiculing and sexually abusing women. The election of a misogynistic president has a wide range of implications for

40. Ellie Ng, " 'It Is the MTR's Problem': Incoming Leader Carrie Lam Denies Not Knowing How to Use Octopus Smart Card," *Hong Kong Free Press*, May 22, 2017, http://hongkongfp.com/2017/05/22/mtrs-problem-incoming-leader-carrie-lam-denies-not-knowing-use-octopus-smart-card/.

41. Angelia Wagner, "Tolerating the Trolls? Gendered Perceptions of Online Harassment of Politicians in Canada," *Feminist Media Studies* 0, no. 0 (April 8, 2020): 1–16, https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2020.1749691; Andrea Carson, Gosia Mikolajczakb, Leah Ruppanner, and Emily Foley, "From Online Trolls to 'Slut Shaming': Understanding the Role of Incivility and Gender Abuse in Local Government," *Local Government Studies* (2023): 1–24, https://doi.org/10.1080/03003930.2023.2228237; Tamara Fuchs and Fabian Schäfer, "Normalizing Misogyny: Hate Speech and Verbal Abuse of Female Politicians on Japanese Twitter," *Japan Forum* 33, no. 4 (October 2, 2021): 553–79, https://doi.org/10.1080/09555803.2019.1687564.

social consciousness relating to gender disparities in politics and the public's willingness and readiness to correct them.

In Hong Kong, verbal and visual abuse directed toward elected women politicians has long appeared online and offline, with slut shaming being a prominent political tactic and cultural practice for opposition politicians as well as the general public. The Hong Kong Equal Opportunities Commission released a report revealing that the public and media outlets are more attentive to the appearance of women politicians, particularly those who are relatively young, than their political vision and policies.[42] From elected district councilors to top LegCo leaders, women politicians are widely subjected to sexist stereotypes and sexually charged comments, if not harassment and assault.[43] The Anti-ELAB Movement was, as has been seen, no exception in this regard. In the protests, Lam was constantly referred to using sexualized language. She was likened to a pig, an insult that, in Chinese slang, means "stupid," "dirty," and "sexually aggressive," in addition to more specific claims that she was fubsy and deaf and blind to the protesters' demands. Her image was manipulated digitally into pornographic poses—showing her naked except with her hands covering her breasts or dressed in sexually explicit attire—along with other pro-establishment women politicians. Likewise, during demonstrations, protesters shouted "Carrie slut, communist dog" and circulated images of her kissing or sexually involved with Xi Jinping, including one of Xi groping Lam and her husband wearing a green hat symbolizing cuckoldry. Moreover, on the Canadian internet pornography video-sharing website Pornhub, Lam's teary TV interview was uploaded with the title "Old Woman Was Fucked 'Til Cry" and sorted under the categories of "Amateur," "Asian," "Blowjob," "HD Porn," "Hardcore," "Old/Young," "Public," "Small Tits," and "Solo Female" with the tags

42. "Research on Public Perceptions of Female Political Leaders," Gender Research Center.
43. Sebastian Skov Andersen and Joyce Leung, "'How Much for an Hour?': Hong Kong Female Politicians Speak Out against Sexual Harassment Culture," *Hong Kong Free Press*, July 5, 2020, http://hongkongfp.com/2020/07/05/how-much-for-an-hour-hong-kong-female-politicians-speak-out-against-sexual-harassment-culture/.

"petite," "old," and "fat." As a commenter suggested, such practices sexualize and objectify women under the traditional male gaze and patriarchal aesthetics.[44]

In the pro-democracy movement, misogyny was evoked as an affect, palpable anger and rage that incites action. The acts of calling Lam a bitch or slut, depicting her in sexist or sexualized ways, or insulting her mother may have served to increase the protesters' sense of belonging to the in-group. Yet, precisely because the ire directed toward women politicians was legitimized as the kind of free expression that the pro-democracy movement championed and claimed would be lost should it fail to achieve its objectives, the misogyny embedded in this raged-filled form of expression has been masked. In this way, sexist and misogynistic language and actions can easily be wiped off as a side effect of the red pill, and any critique of them is subordinated to the presumed higher pursuit of social justice, liberty, and democracy proclaimed as the ethos of the movement.

Epilogue

In this discussion, I have been especially attentive to forms of discourse targeting women politicians that are replete with gender stereotyping, sexism, and misogyny associated with the pro-democracy movement in postcolonial Hong Kong. Such discourse is, in turn, rooted in the prevailing patriarchal culture. Whereas both the police violence against women protesters and the sexism in the movement itself have been widely discussed, the discourse regarding women in politics, including leading pro-establishment figures, has received relatively little attention. When discussions arose, the tone tended to be sexist, misogynistic, discriminative, and abusive. This was

44. Xin-en Wu, "Fighting against the Oppression from Carrie Lam Ceng Yuet-ngor Should Not Resort to Slut Shaming," News Lens, August 2, 2019, https://www.thenewslens.com/article/122972.

especially the case in the latter part of the movement, after several painful months of protests had bred despair and anger throughout the city, and these emotions were magnified by the fear and uncertainty associated with the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

A critical reflection on the limited attention and, therefore, discussion that these issues have received makes obvious the still deeply entrenched patriarchal culture of politics in Hong Kong. This culture is manifested in Lam's narrative of motherly love as well as the protesters' mothers' efforts to lay claim to this theme. As part of the political strategizing by both the pro-democracy and pro-establishment sides of the debate, the discursive politics contesting which group deserved the title "mother(s) of the city" acted out a practice of bordering; for instance, distinguishing the "real" Hong Kong mothers who supported the protesters from the evil pro-establishment would-be mother Carrie Lam. More importantly, this highly visible discourse, in the first place, justified sexism, misogyny, and harassment as legitimate tactics in efforts to defeat political rivals, thus embedding the patriarchy within the pro-democracy movement rather than challenging it. Second, by prioritizing the distinguishment of us and them—an arbitrary construct of binary opposition between pro-establishment and pro-democracy—the bordering practice also excludes multiple groups that do not fit neatly in the categorization but are equally important in society and in the movement, resulting in the undemocratic silencing of the alternative voices of those not considered "one of us" or sufficiently loyal to the in-group of either side.

In analyzing the circulation of misogyny in popular culture, media scholar Sarah Banet-Weiser argued that popular feminism legitimizes some, mostly neoliberal, forms of feminist expression that do not seek to address the structural problems caused or exacerbated by patriarchal cultures and capitalism.[45] Such forms become more visible than others, and this is the

45. Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2018).

case with popular misogyny, some heightened forms of which—whether associated with the MGTOW (Men Going Their Own Way), the red pill, incels, other extreme far-right women haters, or the election of Donald Trump—have had the effect of rendering systemic and structural misogyny less visible. Banet-Weiser asserted that these less visible forms of misogyny have become increasingly prevalent in institutions, laws, policies, and, most importantly, common-sense notions that normalize gender inequality, sexism, discrimination, homophobia, and xenophobia. Misogyny is more hegemonic than ever before in networked societies, in which it persists through the viral distribution online and in everyday speech and actions.

These diagnoses are timely in terms of understanding the role of misogyny in the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong. Tellingly, when feminist scholars have pointed out the internal conflicts and exclusionary practices within the Anti-ELAB Movement in 2019, they have themselves been subjected to intense harassment, cyberbullying, and public censure from various sides.[46] In fact, women activists were always cautious about bringing up gender issues in Hong Kong's pro-democracy movements so as to avoid accusations of being divisive or distracting attention away from the achievement of democratic goals—as if these goals should not or did not encompass justice, liberty, and equality for women and other social minorities. If the trolling and abuse of women protesters are unacceptable in any social context, this prohibition logically extends to women on the other side, in this case to pro-establishment women politicians and women opposed to the protests. However, while the police mistreated women protesters and women politicians like Lam were victimized, the latter type of abuse was strategically incorporated into the pro-democracy discourse. In this context, the abuse served to evoke emotions and incite actions to protect women as a route to justice and self-determination, with Lam depicted

46. Petula Sik Ying Ho and Minnie Ming Li, "A Feminist Snap: Has Feminism in Hong Kong Been Defeated?," *Made in China Journal* 6, no. 3 (March 8, 2022), https://madeinchina-journal.com/2022/03/08/a-feminist-snap-feminism-in-hong-kong/.

as the evil slut who impedes the development of democracy. These misogynistic practices are also a strong reminder of the tokenization of women in social movements through exclusionary practices that consign them to the out-group and the failure to acknowledge the intersectional oppressions and inequalities to which all women are subject. Whereas I joined the call to theorize Hong Kong's struggles in recent years, as exemplified in the 2019 movement, "beyond the reductionist binaries of democracy and authoritarianism, independence and annexation, capitalism and communism, and freedom and repression,"[47] I believe that a feminist critique anchored at the ethics of care is equally, if not more, crucial yet often overlooked in understanding the complexity and dynamics of social movements and questioning the underlying patriarchal hegemony and oppressive practices from within.[48]

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47. Liu et al., *Reorienting Hong Kong's Resistance*, xviii.
48. Petula Sik Ying Ho, "Queering the Valiant—an Alternative Perspective on the Hong Kong Protest Movement," *Feminista Journal*, March 8, 2020, https://feministajournal.com/queering-the-valiant-an-alternative-perspective-on-the-hong-kong-protest-movement/; Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).