

Dancing with Anthems, Godzilla and Laser Pointers: Performance as Protest in the Post-Umbrella Movement Era and the 2019 Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill movement in Hong Kong¹

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Abstract

In this paper, I explore public performances in protest as a form of civic participation, especially for performances that aim to challenge and critique two controversial laws in Hong Kong, the Anthem Law and the Anti-Extradition Law. I focus on how arguments presented in the protest are performed in public, particularly on how participants make use of their voices and bodies in improvised and choreographed ways. I focus on two examples. The first is a series of “flash mob” events organized by the pro-democracy political party, Demosistō, who performed and parodied the national anthem, “March of the Volunteers”. The second example is a public assembly during the Anti-Extradition Law movement, where protestors used laser pointers to transform a protest space into a disco-like dance floor. I read these cases in dialogue with scholarship on performativity by Judith Butler, Richard Schechner, Jorge Cadena-Roa and Cristina Puga. I focus on how protestors navigate identity through performing with music in public space, where civic engagement manifests as bodily movements, sound and voices.

Introduction

This article explores aspects of protest and performance in Hong Kong in the Post Umbrella Movement era (2014–2018) and the 2019 Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill (Anti-ELAB) movement, with a focus on how participants make use of their voices and bodies in improvised and choreographed ways. In the first case, Demosisto, a pro-democracy political party (dissolved in 2020), organized a series of flash mobs in which participants performed the contrafacta of the “March of the Volunteers”, the national anthem in Hong Kong, as a response to the National Anthem Law controversy in 2017. The second case, a Laser Point Show from the 2019 Anti-ELAB movement, is one of the many examples that exemplify how protestors use public space in creative ways. This article is a part of the ethnographic research conducted between 2016 and 2020, for which I have conducted interviews, participant-observation, and attended events of various kinds related to how communities in Hong Kong are formed and dissolved through collective music making.² This article particularly focuses on events recorded and circulated via social media, and thus serve as examples of digital activism in Hong Kong’s protest movements. Methodologically, a hybrid ethnography expands our understanding of the notion of liveness in

¹ In this article, “Post Umbrella Movement era” refers to the period from 2014–2018, the intervening years between the two major social movements in 2014 and 2019. The two cases in the 2017 Anthem Law controversy, *Dancing with the Anthem* and *Godzilla*, fell into this period. Followed by an example of protestors performing with laser pointers in the 2019 Anti-Extradition Law movement.

² This article is an extension from of the author’s PhD dissertation, published in 2022. Ho-Yan Tang, “The Singing Public in Hong Kong: Choral Music as Social Life” (PhD diss., University of Hong Kong, 2022).

performance as protest.³

I will further elaborate on what I mean by performance as protest by drawing on the notion of performativity in everyday life, based on Judith Butler, Richard Schechner, Jorge Cadena-Roa and Cristina Puga.⁴ I aim to show events such as the examples below demonstrate how protestors appropriate public space in ways that fundamentally transform the power dynamics between the public and the authority through movement and music. I also want to highlight the significance of the examples below, in which the protestors expand our understanding of performance as a critical lens to archive and understand Hong Kong society, or as Richard Schechner puts it, “critical lens to understanding societies, groups, and individuals who embody and enact their personal and collective identities.”⁵

Background: Hong Kong National Anthem Law Controversy and Anti-ELAB Movement

The Hong Kong National Anthem Law Controversy took place during the political turmoil of the so-called Post-Umbrella Movement era (2014–2018), between two of the most significant political movements in recent decades – the Umbrella movement in 2014 and the Anti-ELAB movement in 2019.⁶ The Umbrella movement was the first few social movements since the 1997 Handover in which Hong Kong citizens occupied streets to pressurize the Chinese government to honour the constitutional promise for universal suffrage. After the eventual conclusion of the movement, a growing sense of anxiety began spreading among citizens as multiple attempts were made by the government to propose different bills and new laws that, in the eyes of some citizens, restrict their rights and freedom in the name of national security.⁷ Such a sense of anxiety fuels grassroots initiatives and organizations, or new political parties, which aim to advocate universal suffrage and promote democratic ideals.

Early in the 2014 Umbrella Movement, people occupied major business districts like Central, Admiralty, Mong Kok and spaces outside the government headquarters. Such protest strategies were novel in Hong Kong’s protest imaginary. They pushed the boundaries of what public space means to Hong Kong, as they decorated the government properties with plants and post-it memos, hosted public seminars on the crossroads, performed and camped in occupied sites.⁸ The novelty of these protest strategies is presented in the use of the internet to broadcast creative protest actions, and stir up emotions of the public. These innovative responses challenge the protest landscape, and exploit loopholes in the security

³ For recent scholarship on online ethnography, see Marcela A. Fuentes, *Performance Constellations: Networks of Protest and Activism in Latin America*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2019). Liz Przybylski, *Hybrid Ethnography: Online, Offline, and In Between*, (Los Angeles: Sage, 2020).

⁴ While the notion of performativity in protest is a widely studied topic, I focus on the use of songs, more particularly the national anthem, in a protest context. See Judith Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Who Sings the Nation-State?* (New York: Seagull Books, 2007), Jorge Cadena-Roa and Cristina Puga, “Protest and Performativity,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Politics and Performance*, ed. Shirin Rai et al., 1st ed. (Oxford University Press, 2021), 101–16.

⁵ Richard Schechner, “The New Third World?,” in *Performed Imaginaries* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

⁶ For a detailed chronological account of the Umbrella Movement, see Ngok Ma and Edmund W. Cheng, eds., “Appendix: The Umbrella Movement—Chronology of Major Events,” in *The Umbrella Movement* (Amsterdam University Press, 2019), 347–52. For more details on the role of online activism during the movement, see Francis L. F. Lee, “Internet Alternative Media, Movement Experience, and Radicalism: The Case of Post-Umbrella Movement Hong Kong,” *Social Movement Studies* 17, no. 2 (March 4, 2018): 219–33.

⁷ Yan-ho Lai, “Securitisation or Autocratisation? Hong Kong’s Rule of Law under the Shadow of China’s Authoritarian Governance,” *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 58, no. 1 (February 1, 2023): 8–25.

⁸ Laikwan Pang, “Occupy, Arts, and Place,” in *The Appearing Demos* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020), 89–114.

apparatus. Post-Umbrella Movement era and eventually the Anti-ELAB movement is also a time considered as a continual search for such loopholes through occupying the streets with collective singing, flash mobs, spontaneous dancing in the public space as the examples in this article will demonstrate.

As the citizens push boundaries on the use of public space and protest with creative means, the government begins to legislate against them. First, the authority targets the use of the national anthem. In 2017, the National People's Congress in Beijing passed legislation that regulates the national anthem's usage within the People's Republic of China. The Congress further confirmed on 4 November 2017, that Hong Kong and Macau, as special administrative regions and independent jurisdictions, would need to start the legislation process and eventually have their own regional Anthem Laws in accordance with the law passed by the National People's Congress.⁹ The Hong Kong National Anthem Law (officially, it is called the National Anthem Ordinance) commenced on 12th June 2020. The Law aims to promote patriotism by legislating proper decorum in the uses and playing of the "March of the Volunteers" as a national symbol.

The Anthem Law sparked debate among Hong Kong's public on whether the regulation goes too far, as the Law regulates propriety as a measurement of patriotism. The Law legislates the performance, singing and playing (e.g. use of musical instruments) of the national anthem. Section 5, for example, refers to how people are required to perform the national anthem, with reference to an official music score and recording that are attached in the appendix section of the Law. Section 7 prohibits insulting behaviours while one performs the anthem. Critics have argued that these laws infringe on basic civil liberties, and thus are part of a wider effort to inculcate unwelcomed patriotism in the Hong Kong public.

The Anti-ELAB movement in 2019 resulted in large-scale demonstrations and strikes across the city. Unlike the Umbrella Movement where people occupied particular sites in major commercial districts, people in 2019 organized weekly demonstrations in addition to spontaneous mass gatherings, which sometimes have led to direct physical confrontations with law-enforcement authorities and among communities from different political camps. The movement started on June 9, on which an estimated one million people marched on Hong Kong Island to demand the government to withdraw the proposed Extradition Law Amendment Bill (ELAB), which suggested criminal suspects can be extradited to China. As the government initially stood firm in its position and refused to withdraw the bill, weekly city-wide demonstrations began to break out and spread across the city.¹⁰ Although the protests were initially peaceful, the level of violence intensified and transformed into riots. Hong Kong protestors, which were peaceful and non-violent a few years back, became no strangers to tear gas and roadblocks.

Alongside the violence, some protestors chose to participate in the movement through creative and artistic means. For example, there were various forms of civil disobedience, such as occupying public transportation systems using flash mobs' and non-cooperation campaigns (e.g. refusing to pay for tickets when using the metro system, drivers occupying roads by refusing to leave roundabouts in major intersections, staging human chains on the street, and so on). Both pro-government and anti-government messages and propaganda circulated online, including posters, postcards, and songs.¹¹ In sum, creative

⁹ "HKSAR Government Commences Local Legislation of National Anthem Law," accessed January 31, 2023, <https://www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/201711/04/P2017110400681.htm>.

¹⁰ There is an archive at South China Morning Post that help English readers to understanding more about the Anti-Extradition Law controversy, see "Hong Kong Extradition Bill | South China Morning Post," accessed January 31, 2023, <https://www.scmp.com/topics/hong-kong-extradition-bill>.

¹¹ "Glory to Hong Kong" is one of the anthems composed during the Anti-ELAB movement. Protestors called this anthem the new "National Anthem". After 2019, "Glory to Hong Kong" is still circulating on the online platforms, and causes

performances and demonstrations targeting the two controversial laws are a result of the changing protest landscape. By the changing protest landscape, I refer to a more diverse means to protests. If one merely looks at the violent and non-violent dimensions of protest actions, we will miss the creative and aesthetic dimension. Unlike the mass demonstration in Anti-ELAB movement which received global attention, examples in this article demonstrate an essential but neglected aesthetic dimension of protest actions. These aesthetic actions, as I will argue below, equally allow participants to enter the public realm as a form of civic participation, where they negotiate their relationship with one another, the authority, and the state as they dance, sing, leave comments online, and share protest performance video footage.

Demosisto: Dancing with Anthems

The first example is a series of Flash Mob performances organized by the political organization, Demosisto, led by student leaders in the Umbrella Movement such as Joshua Wong, Nathan Law, and Agnes Chow. Demosisto is a pro-democracy political party formed in 2016, which advocates Hong Kong autonomy, universal suffrage, and has been a strong critic of the Hong Kong and Beijing governments.¹² The following event took place in 2018, after the imprisonment of Joshua Wong and Nathan Law, and was organized as a response to the National Anthem Law controversy. The participants performed distorted bodily gestures or alternated musical materials with the official national anthem “March of the Volunteers” as the background music.

Demosisto sought to engage the “March of the Volunteers” in playful and creative ways as a protest statement, by organizing a series of flash mobs. The first of these took place at a busy intersection at Mong Kok Portland Street on 8 April 2018 at Portland Street near Langham Place, a well-known shopping mall in the Kowloon district of Hong Kong. This event was coordinated and planned among Demosisto members—and thus was not widely advertised, as per flash mob tactics. It was filmed and circulated as a 47-second edited video on Demosisto’s Facebook official page.¹³ As in the case of most flash mobs, the performance is as much the online video as it is the actual flash mob that took place in April of 2018. That is, the video is not only a record or document of a performance, but rather should be treated as an aesthetic event itself, carefully edited and curated. The online activities surrounding the video continue the performance beyond the physical performance sites with the targeted audience of this flash mob and its online viewers. The continuation of the event in online space is exemplified, for example, in various online discussions and through sharing and ‘likes’ on social media. In the case of Demosisto’s flash mob, the filmed event took place on 8 April 2018, was uploaded on 12 April, but active discussion on social media continued weeks after the performance.

The video opens at a busy Portland Street with caption notes indicating the date, time and venue. The video was titled “The anthem freezes every inch of our life. #flashmob” [*sic*] as a part of Demosisto’s Anti-Anthem Law campaign in 2018. As the video begins, one hears the tune of the “March of the Volunteers” in its original key in G major. six seconds in, the video speeds up as the anthem tune is

controversy in international sports games when the unofficial anthem is broadcast in formal ceremonies. See Tiffany May, “Hong Kong Demands Inquiry After Protest Song Is Played Before Rugby Match,” *The New York Times*, November 14, 2022. Hilary Leung, “The Story Behind Hong Kong’s New ‘National Anthem,’” *Time*, September 10, 2019.

¹² The official website of Demosisto was discontinued after the party dissolved in 2020. However, their social media page remains online, see <https://www.facebook.com/demosisto/>.

¹³ 香港眾志 Demosistō, “【🇭🇰國歌，凍結每一吋生活❄️】#快閃行動👤,” Facebook video, 8:10, April 12, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=833697316839092>.

transposed up a fifth. The singing voice in the recording, now under a chipmunk voice effect, overlays another track of street noises. The whole sound design adds playfulness and irony to the visually frozen participants dressed in red. The scene begins with a few dozen participants milling about the intersection and seeming to be posing. The onlookers, walking to and fro, participated in the performance by “not participating”; they created a contrast between those participants at a standstill and the moving onlookers who carry on with their lives. One sees the participants begin to pose as if they were frozen in the middle of the crosswalk (Figure 1). The video then includes close-up shots of different “frozen” poses representing elements of daily life, for instance, reading a book, eating street food, playing badminton, wearing lipstick and pointing up at the sky. We also see close-up shots of pedestrians. Some of them ignore the flash mob participants, acting as if they do not exist, while others take videos and pictures with their smartphones, fascinated by the event. Suddenly, the music of the anthem stops, and the “frozen” participants resume walking, blending into the onlookers by crossing the pedestrian crossing. In the end, the video caption reads, “When the tune of the anthem is played, our freedom in everyday life is detained.”



Figure 1. Screenshot of Demosisto’s flash mob performance on 8 April 2018. People in red t-shirts are performers, “frozen” while bystanders walk around them.¹⁴

It is no coincidence Demosisto used on Mong Kok as the protest site, where the public and the private sectors of Hong Kong people’s daily life intersect in almost a surreal form. By surreal, I refer to the compact density of the private and public in Mong Kok, happening simultaneously in multiple dimensions. There, buildings exist with illegal sex workers working next to the dwellings of regular private households. Independent bookstores are often just a few floors down - bookstores that host scholarly exchanges and lectures. It is no coincidence that Sai Yeung Choi Street South and Portland Street, besides

¹⁴香港眾志 Demosisto, “【🇺🇹國歌，凍結每一吋生活❄️】#快閃行動👤,” Facebook video, 8:10, April 12, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=833697316839092>.

being a stage for Demosisto's performances, is also the site of Mong Kok civil unrest in 2016 (nicknamed the "Fishball Revolution") and multiple instances of civil unrest during the 2019 Anti-Extradition Law movement to come.¹⁵ More directly, the mob took up a public space, that is, the middle of a crosswalk where the flash mob participants are choreographed. These "frozen" actions are performed like a dance, in ways that also exaggerate people's everyday movements into poses, for example, eating noodles, wearing lipstick, looking at their cell phone screen, reading a book, and tying shoelaces, and so on. The meanings are conveyed through the act being "frozen", which of course serves as a metaphor for the curtailment of personal and individual freedom, visually acting out Demosisto's interpretation of the law's influence on Hong Kong. From a practical viewpoint, acting "frozen" in fact requires enormous body energy to fight the urge to move or influences of other moving bodies in the performance.

Demosisto's flash mob aims to challenge the government's claim that the National Anthem Law only regulates public conduct. For Demosisto, regulating public behaviour is also a means to regulate the private, ordinary aspects of daily life. By emphasizing notions of "propriety", and by penalizing "improper" conduct, the National Anthem Law regulates people in their private actions and their thoughts. According to the video description, these internal thoughts include the inculcation of patriotic values. Demosisto argues the National Anthem Law allows the state to legislate to regulate private behaviours and thoughts, contributing to the possible development of patriotism. Demosisto articulates such worries through their flash mob performance. Choreographed actions inspired by one's daily life, such as tying shoelaces and holding a badminton rack up high, show neither respect nor disrespect towards the national anthem. Demosisto's flash mobs aesthetically enact their political arguments with recorded music and choreographed actions, treating the streets and online platforms as a stage. In other words, their political statements are enacted through embodied performance as civic participation and resistance.

The Performative Aspects of Demosisto's Flash Mob Performances

National symbols, in the capacity as "national" symbols, function within systems of meaning and value to reinforce civic institutions that are foundational to state authority and power. Yet, these symbols never function functionalistically, as when one alters and distorts national symbols like the national anthem, a wide range of new meanings can be produced. Regulating manners in anthem singing through legal means, therefore, should be read as an attempt to regulate a system of beliefs. Performative aspects of an anthem performance, similarly, should be understood as a negotiation with a particular system of beliefs. Setting up an anthem law, in other words, is to penalise those who failed to comply with the system of beliefs.

Shanna L. Redmond describes the act of anthem singing as serving to "make the listening audience and political public merge". Redmond further elaborates:

Anthems demand something from their listeners. In performance, they often occasion hands placed over hearts or standing at attention. Yet more than a physical gesture, anthems require a subscription to a system of beliefs that stir and organize the receivers of the music. At its best this system inspires its listeners to believe that the circumstances or world around them can change for the better—that the vision of freedom represented in the song's lyrics and/or

¹⁵ BBC "Hong Kong's Mong Kok Clashes: More than Fishballs," *BBC News*, February 9, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-35529785>.

history are worth fighting for in the contemporary moment.¹⁶

Redmond sees anthem singing as embodied and choreographed, embedded within a system of beliefs and calls-to-action. In the case of Demosisto, they are performed with the recording of the “March of the Volunteer” with distorted bodily gestures. Instead of placing hands over their hearts and standing still, the performers played badminton, tied a shoe, wore lipstick and read a book. This performance highlights the normative “system of beliefs” that comes with the regulated practice of anthem-singing under the National Anthem law, demanding the listening audience to become part of a nationalized public whenever the national anthem is played. This nationalized public are those who “refuse to be slaves”, who build the new Great Wall “with our flesh and blood”, and “the Chinese people face their greatest peril”, as the lyrics of the “March of the Volunteer” reveal. More importantly, as the authority could decide when to play the national anthem, those who failed to comply will receive punishment according to the law. That means the distorted bodily gestures presented an irony of inserting a normative system of beliefs through the regulation of anthem singing. The “vision of freedom represented in the song’s lyrics” is undermined by restricting people’s freedom to perform the national anthem in critical and subversive ways.

From J.L. Austin to Judith Butler, notions of performativity provide an analytic lens to look at Demosisto’s flash mob performance in Mong Kok. J.L. Austin illustrates the power of words with his classic example of how the office-bearer’s act of pronouncing a bride and groom as “husband and wife” alone enacts a transformation in the status of the couple from unmarried to married.¹⁷ While performativity has its roots in the philosophy of language, it has been widely adopted in feminist, critical, and post-colonial studies to conceptualize the power of discourse to structure social life, especially in subjectivating subjects. Judith Butler, for example, theorizes gender as performative, in that normative injunctions compel us to act out our gender roles in stylized, repetitive ways. To declare bodies “female” or “male” is to assign a gender identity that constitutes and prescribes our ways of being-in-the-world, forcing us to perform stylized acts (modes of dress, of speech, of behaviour) that repeats and reproduces gender norms. In this view, gender materializes in a process of “doing”, a set of compelled and repeated performative acts, rather than something innate to our biological or inner dispositions.

Notably, Butler’s performativity goes beyond gender. In Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s *Who Sings the Nation-State?* (2007), Butler explores the framework of performativity surrounding issues of statehood, citizenship, and belonging in our globalized world. Butler cites a series of immigration reform protests across the United States in 2006, in which the national anthem was featured prominently.¹⁸ Responding to President George W. Bush’s suggestion that “The Star-Spangled Banner” could only be sung in English rather than in Spanish, protesters took singing the anthem in Spanish as a rebuke to nativism in American politics. Butler draws on this example to provoke readers to rethink the performative politics in what she calls “sensate democracy”, that is, where the aesthetic articulates with the public and its relation to statehood:

I want to suggest to you that neither Agamben nor Arendt can quite theorize this particular act

¹⁶ Shana L. Redmond, *Anthem: Social Movements and the Sound of Solidarity in the African Diaspora* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 2-3. Redmond’s emphasises on the political meanings in choreographed movements intersects with San San Kwan’s work on Falun Gong as a site of protest in Hong Kong, see SanSan Kwan, “Jagged Presence in the Liquid City,” in *Kinesthetic City: Dance and Movement in Chinese Urban Spaces* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 106–34.

¹⁷ J. L. Austin, “Lecture I,” in *How To Do Things With Words: The William James Lectures Delivered at Harvard University in 1955*, ed. J.L. Austin (Oxford University Press, 1975), 1-11.

¹⁸ Judith Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Who Sings the Nation-State?* (New York: Seagull Books, 2007), 57-60.

of singing, and that we have yet to develop the language we need to do so. It would also involve rethinking certain ideas of sensate democracy, of aesthetic articulation within the political sphere, and the relationship between song and what is called the "public".¹⁹

Butler is particularly interested in how the protestors coalesce by occupying the street. Her comments on the performative aspects of protest performances shed light on how to see protest performances in Hong Kong's National Anthem Law controversy as a site of contestation:

The point is not simply to situate the song on the street, but to expose the street as the site for free assembly. At this point, the song can be understood not only as the expression of freedom or the longing for enfranchisement—though it is, clearly, both those things—but also as restaging the street, enacting freedom of assembly precisely when and where it is explicitly prohibited by law.²⁰

One notes the resonance, for example, with the case of Demosisto's flash mob in Mong Kok, where they "restage" the street as their act tries blur the line between what constitutes the public and private realms. In their performance, the public space of the road is re-imbued with political signifi-ance, as the choreographed, frozen spectacle of everyday actions themselves become underlined and transformed into a silent resistance to the normalizing injunctions of the National Anthem Law. The event also importantly dramatizes the effects of the National Anthem Law in freezing and arresting people's freedom in citing the anthem in potentially progressive ways - effects that reverberate in the private and public realms alike.

Demosisto: Dancing with Godzilla

Restaging the street, producing resonance and reimagining public space are key elements in Demosisto's staged protests in the National Anthem Law Controversy. Besides the abovementioned performance in Mong Kok, the following "Godzilla" flash mob example performed also by Demosisto will further illustrate the performative aspects of protest performances, specifically through restaging the Mass Transit Railway (MTR) stations and trains. The following case will be read alongside two studies surrounding the notions of performativity: Noriko Manabe's study on protest music after Fukushima in Japan's urban area, and Jorge Cadena-Roa and Cristina Puga's study on protest performance in the Mexican context.²¹ In addition, Glenda Goodman's study of "God save the King" in Revolutionary America provides reference for studying the relationship between political culture and the circulation of musical works. Reading Demosisto's protest performance alongside studies by Goodman, Manabe, Cadena-Roa and Puga's studies, I add to the repertoire of studies on the use of creativity in redefining public spaces with music, voices and bodies.

Demosisto's "Godzilla" flash mob performance in the metro system presents a similar example as the Mong Kok flash mob, albeit in this case, they use costumes and singing. In the above example, the Godzilla events were also circulated via online videos. On 24 June 2018, Demosisto uploaded two videos of a performance that took place in train cars and stations of the MTR. The video is entitled "Godzilla is here! It wants to remind you to beware of the Anthem Law bill!" (Figure 2) and "Godzilla 2.0. Sing the

¹⁹ Butler and Spivak, *Who Sings the Nation-State?*, 62.

²⁰ Butler and Spivak, *Who Sings the Nation-State?*, 63.

²¹ Cadena-Roa and Puga, "Protest and Performativity," and Noriko Manabe, "Urban Geography, Music, and Protest," in *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised: Protest Music After Fukushima*, ed. Noriko Manabe (Oxford University Press, 2016), 234-261.

anthem randomly, they'll put you in jail.”²² (about eight minutes) The two videos are uploaded on the same day of the event. A supplementary third video, “ROARRR, Godzilla interviews you, what do you think of the Anthem Law bill?” (about three minutes) was uploaded on 30 June 2018.



Figure 2: Screenshot of Demosisto’s “Godzilla” flash mob performance.²³ A translation of the Chinese caption on the left, “Godzilla is here! It wants to remind you to beware of the National Anthem Law bill!” Performers sang in an “art space” which normally required invitations from the MTR company.

Demosisto’s plot is simple. Demosisto performed a Cantonese nursery tune based on the melody of the “March of the Volunteer”, wearing a Godzilla mask on and formal business suits.²⁴ As they walked along the MTR stations and trains, they sang different versions, contrafacta, of the “March of the Volunteers” as a way to criticize the then proposed National Anthem Law bill. The first line goes like this, “As I brought you to travel around the world last night, I ride on a Godzilla... (尋晚我帶你環遊世界, 我騎住哥斯拉....)”

²² For the original video, see Demosisto’s Facebook page: <https://fb.watch/7r7x77C4n2/>.

²³ 香港眾志 Demosistō, “【🚨🦖哥斯拉行動Part2 改編國歌 拉你去坐! 🎵】,” Facebook video, 8:10, June 24, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=874785859396904>.

²⁴ The “Encyclopedia of Virtual Communities in Hong Kong” is a fan page on the entertainment website *Fandom*. In most cases, *Fandom* is an online community for fans of games, movies and anime to create their fan page. The “Encyclopedia of Virtual Communities in Hong Kong”, unlike other Fandom page, centres around the city of Hong Kong. The culture of Hong Kong (mostly online culture) is documented in 12959 entries, co-edited by over 40 active members. The entry on the “March of the Volunteer” was created on September 2017, 2 months after the Beijing government announced the proposed National Anthem Law bill. It is possible that the entry is created as a reaction to the National Anthem Law bill. This entry documented different versions (often as parody or contrafacta) of the “March of the Volunteer”. The Godzilla version is one of them. Despite the amateur nature of this so-called “encyclopedia”, it is a valuable resource for researchers to understand Hong Kong outside the official narrative. Anonymous, “義勇軍進行曲,” 香港網絡大典, 2017, <https://evchk.fandom.com/zh/wiki/義勇軍進行曲>.

Demosisto created a series of videos using the Godzilla character to critique the Anthem Law. The video titled, “Godzilla is here! It wants to remind you to beware of the Anthem Law bill!”, takes place in a subway train on the MTR, in which three performers sing and make speeches. In the video, the performers walk into the train cars in silence, and, as the metro door closes, they begin to sing in unison. They are notably dressed formally, as one might dress for a formal concert performance in Hong Kong, but playful masks were also worn as if the business suits give a sense of formality to the performance, the Godzilla masks undermines it by subjecting the event to a layer of playful irony. In the same video, the audience appears amused or embarrassed if they respond at all.

The lyrics address Hong Kong and Chinese political leaders, and they directly call out the Communist Party as the enemy. While the performers march throughout the MTR trains, echoing the rhythmic, war-like march of the tune, one sees passengers who are indifferent to the goings-on, while others are recording the event with their smartphones. The full version of Demosisto’s contrafact is as follows:

起來，習大大煩住個世界，逼人民去高歌，法治人權也都有晒。

不要林鄭干預，思想嘅自主。

起來，起來，起來，全面戰線一致，

Fight the Communist Party! [*sic*]

前進，前進，前進，前進進

Literal translation:

Rise, Uncle Xi is creating trouble for the world.

Forcing his people to sing,

and wipe out the rule of law and human rights.

We do not want Carrie Lam to interfere with our autonomy to think.

Rise, Rise, Rise

Let’s unite our battlefield, Fight the Community Party! Forward!

Forward! Forward! Forward!

In the second video “Godzilla 2.0. Sing the anthem casually, they’ll put you in jail!”, Demosisto performed near the “Art Space” at the Central Station of the MTR system. “Art Space” is a designated area for invited artists and community art enthusiasts to perform inside the MTR station regularly. Demosisto stationed themselves near the “Art Space”, without permission, as they clap and wave at the passengers while singing both the original Godzilla parody and their new version in alteration. The political message of the performance is narrated both on-site and through captions on the video. One caption states, “Still singing? Singing the parody could be illegal!” while the performers sing the contrafact. Demosisto intentionally blur the line between what is acceptable and what is improper by alternating taboo words, such as “Uncle Xi”, “Fight the Communist Party!”, next to the harmless nursery-like lyrics of “Godzilla” which the performers refer to as “the version we sing when we were children.”

The Performative Aspects of Demosisto's Godzilla Protest Performance

The cultural significance of Demosisto's Godzilla protest performance lies within the use of *contrafacta* and the use of an everyday venue as a stage (site). Performing the Godzilla version of the "March of Volunteer" and the creation of a Demosisto's *contrafact* exemplifies a continuing practice of altering the national anthem as a form of resistance in Hong Kong. A similar cultural practice could be found in Glenda Goodman's study of the different versions of the British anthem "God Save the King" in Revolutionary America. Goodman concludes that "the diversity of the formats and the song versions reveal the ambivalent relationship between postcolonial United States and Britain, as well as the diversity of political culture within the United States."²⁵ In the Hong Kong context when the public compose and circulate the Godzilla version, and when Demosisto flipped the patriotic lyrics of the "March of the Volunteer" into its opposite meanings, these musical activities reveal an ambivalent relationship between Hong Kong and her ruling state, the People's Republic of China.

Besides the circulation and composition of *contrafacta*, the performance as a whole opens up a space for critique. By the performance "as a whole", I refer to the ways performers are dressed, the venue, and the audience's reaction online and on-site. Demosisto argues that the National Anthem Law is about regulating the very act of remembering Hong Kong's many identities outside those which the state narrative imposes. They argue that Hong Kong's identity is more diverse and richer than what the National Anthem Law allows. They argue that the National Anthem Law is part of the government's attempt to produce univocal Chinese identifications for people living in Hong Kong by regulating all future performances of the national anthem. This political project is what Demosisto wants Hong Kong people to be aware of and refuse. Memories and cultures are congealed in the different locally produced versions of the "March of the Volunteer," and they should not be unduly eliminated by the National Anthem Law. Indeed, something intimate as childhood memories, for example, the everyday schoolyard songs like the Godzilla version is part of a multivocal Hong Kong identity. This is echoed by people in the comment sections of the Godzilla performance, as commenters left messages or pictographs (more commonly known as emojis) in support of Demosisto performance, such as "face with tears of joy" and "add oil!" One commenter even commented, "I sang this song as a kid!"²⁶

Demosisto's examples also demonstrate how bodies and sound in the performance are carefully designed. In the Godzilla flash mob, Demosisto appropriates the public space of the MTR to recreate these playful memories by performing the well-known *contrafact*, albeit using their versions to articulate their political message. Demosisto reminds its audience that the National Anthem Law isn't simply about mandating public conduct, but works at a more intimate, bodily level. Different performative strategies are employed in Demosisto's performance. First, they perform in MTR stations and trains to reach a wider variety of the audience. The onlookers are not necessarily the typical political enthusiasts who show up in rallies, but anyone who would take the MTR. Second, Demosisto stages their performance playfully. They wear Godzilla masks and wear formal suits at the same time. Third, the street is remade into a stage. The targeted audience of the Godzilla performance is its online viewers. These performers wear a microphone

²⁵ The different *contrafacta* of "God save the King" in colonial Hong Kong and the revival of "God save the Queen" in post-handover protests will be a lens to study the changing relationship between Britain and Hong Kong. However, it is beyond the spectrum of this article.

²⁶ User "Zaza Vic" left a comment in 2020, "细个时个个都唱[過]啦" (This is the song I sang as a kid!). See Demosisto's Facebook page: <https://fb.watch/7r7x77C4n2/>.

during the production, the performance is meant to be circulated online. Among the three videos regarding the MTR flash mob, “ROARRR, Godzilla interviews you, what do you think of the Anthem Law bill?” is a three minutes edited video with over 40K views.²⁷

Cadena-Roa and Puga remind us that performativity is an analytic tool that “helps to explain why people react to and embrace a cause”.²⁸ The reasons often involve how the protestors and audience enact and receive the message through choreographed performance. Slogans, outfits, the performance space, and musical choices directly affect how the audience resonate with the political claims made by the protestors, and even so, participate in the protest. Demosisto created a temporal space by performing the Godzilla version of the “March of the Volunteer” in the MTR. This temporal space is a theatrical experience of violating the National Anthem Law, designed playfully.²⁹ Demosisto reminds the online viewers and the audience on-site that performing these “fun” anthem versions would not be tolerated by the government in the future. The performance in Portland Street in Mong Kok and the Godzilla performance could be considered as a series of performative events to perform Demosisto’s political claims. Instead of chanting slogans, Demosisto demonstrates how performative strategies could be employed to produce an alternative protest experience for the public.

Laser Pointers Show

The use of performative strategies in protests in Hong Kong is coincidental. Besides Demosisto, performative moments happen spontaneously in other protest scenarios. The National Anthem Law controversy served as a prelude to the political turmoil that stormed the city in 2019. Throughout 2019, alongside the city-wide protests, strikes, and violence, some street events provide an alternative angle in seeing how people performed their political demands through creative means. The Laser Pointers Show is one of many such examples, alongside human chain events, singing on the streets, and temporary art installations. The reason I focus on the Laser Pointers Show is that the show is another vivid example of how dance and music work cohesively to create moments of togetherness, and allow participants symbolically cultivate a sense of “common” by taking ownership of the public space in Hong Kong, the cultural area at Tsim Sha Tsui next to the Victoria Harbour.

On the evening of 7 August 2019, the city was still under the heat of multiple large-scale demonstrations since June. It was a time when online activism was as heated as activism on the street, in which people criticize the government in online forums, and sometimes call for actions to motivate more people to protest on the street.³⁰ The biggest story on August 7th in the news and on the internet was the arrest of a student leader accused of bulk purchasing boxes of pocket-sized laser pointers, which the authorities class as “offensive weapons.” According to the police press conference after the arrest, laser pointers were considered dangerous and might cause harm to others, with the risk of burning and eye

²⁷ See Demosisto’s Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/demosisto/videos/880469152161908/>.

²⁸ Cadena-Roa and Puga study protests in Mexican politics. Their discussion on theatrical performance, singing and masks in mass demonstrations is particularly relevant to the case of Demosisto. See Cadena-Roa and Puga, “Protest and Performativity,” 114.

²⁹ During the protest performance in June 2018, the National Anthem Law was still a proposed bill. In June 2020, the National Anthem Law was passed. If the performance were to perform after June 2020, it is very likely the performance would violate the Law.

³⁰ A detailed discussion on the incident of Laser Pointers: “Laser Pointers Are Not Illegal in Hong Kong, but Are They Weapons, and What Harm Can They Do to People? | South China Morning Post,” accessed January 31, 2023, <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/law-and-crime/article/3021870/laser-pointers-are-not-illegal-hong-kong-are-they>.

injuries. The public and the press, however, questioned the legitimacy of the arrest, as these laser pointers which people could easily buy in any electronic stores on the streets usually cause no harm, given these pointers' low power output.

In response to the arrest, a crowd gathered in front of the Hong Kong Space Museum at Tsim Sha Tsui following an online call-to-action. Taking from a line that the police used in the press conference, that “using laser pointers for star gazing is legal”, people gathered near the Hong Kong Space Museum to “star gaze” with laser pointers. (As the museum is located at the heart of the city, there is too much light pollution for any serious star gazing.) As I observed from the online live stream, the crowd, however, improvised by using the laser pointers to partake in what the police considered acceptable conduct. Some people pointed lasers at a tree, as a sarcastic reply to the police’s claim that laser pointers can cause a fire. Others made use of the museum’s dome shape exterior and transformed it into a giant disco ball decorated by green and blue lights from the laser pointers. In terms of music, the crowd immediately associated the event with theme songs related to lasers, for instance, the theme tune of Star Wars and Cantopop *Gik1 Gwong1 Jung1* 激光中 (Literal translation: Submerged in Laser Point).

The Performative Aspects of The Laser Pointers Show

The way how the participants interacted with Cantopop *Gik1 Gwong1 Jung1* 激光中 by Roman Tam exemplified the performative and choric aspects of performing in a public realm as protest. (Figure 3) The nuances of this performance need to be read in the context of Cantopop culture, the 2014 Umbrella Movement, and tourism in post-handover Hong Kong.



Figure 3: A participant dancing through the projector resulted in his/her silhouette being projected onto the wall of the Space Museum.³¹

³¹ This is a screenshot from a video uploaded on August 8, 2019, one day after the actual event. For the full video see Monster09gaga, “(激光中) 七夕觀 - 香港太空館Hong Kong Space Museum,” YouTube short, August 8, 2019, <https://youtube.com/shorts/UuFET2u1Gvk?feature=share>.

Roman Tam was described as the “godfather” of Hong Kong music industry in his obituaries in 2002’s *Variety* magazine vol. 388.³² Notably, Tam was considered a “flamboyant” star and a pioneer in exploring sexuality by posing nude and performing in drag in the 1980s, which was widely considered taboo in Asian pop culture. The music video for “Submerged in Laser Point” is a landmark work that demonstrates Roman Tam’s pioneering style and is fondly remembered by the crowd as a song from the golden age of Hong Kong’s prosperity. Roman Tam served as a point of shared memory in the evening among the crowd. For this reason, many people could sing along when someone played the music throughout the evening.

The idea of using light shows and projecting images onto public buildings has been a well-established tactic since the 2014 Umbrella Movement. An art installation “Stand by You” (2014) likewise projected messages onto the wall of government buildings during the Umbrella protests, an act that has become iconic within the protest movement.³³ The messages displayed came in real-time from around the world, in which people would type their messages through a website and project their support to the protestors virtually. The projector at the Space Museum, however, was used to create a club-like effect, in which the silhouettes of attendees were projected onto the wall. The light of the projector covered over half the height of the building, which magnified the bodies, as if they were giants dancing with the laser light. The projector also created a real-time platform for people to interact, for example, some used their hands to create shadow puppets of animals such as dogs and ducks, while others danced or posed in the light. Participants at the event danced to Roman Tam’s music, and they cheered when the dancing shadows performed unique movements and gestures.³⁴

Moments of collective remembering in relation to the 2019 Anti-ELAB movement occurred during the laser show when the silhouette of a dancing protester showed a shadow puppet of dogs alongside projected footage of the 721 incident. 721 incident, also known as Yuen Long Attack, was an evening on July 21, 2019 when a mob gathered and attacked protestors and passers-by. The police were accused by the public that they did not respond to the incident immediately. The dog’s silhouette is used to represent “police dogs”, a pejorative metonym for the Hong Kong police. When the silhouette of a dancing protester performs a dog-like hand gesture, a moment of collective remembering ensued. The coded message of a malfunctioning police force is embodied in the dog-like hand gesture of the protester. The performance moment was spontaneous. The goal to collectively mark and remember the 721 incident and mock the police is sustained by physical bodies who participated in the dance event and the online circulation of the dancing moments. The process of decoding the dog’s silhouette happened at the Laser Pointer Show collectively. This moment of collectively decoding reinforced the memories of the 721 incident.

This carnival-like protest distinguished itself from other protest events during the Anti-Extradition Law movement, but the political messages delivered are no less powerful.³⁵ Highlighting the performative

³² Anonymous, “Obituaries: Roman Tam,” *Variety*, November 28, 2002, 73.

³³ *Umbrella Movement - 《並肩上：佔中打氣機》 Stand By You on Vimeo*, accessed January 31, 2023, <https://vimeo.com/109922050>.

³⁴ Improvised movements are mediums to perform embodied meanings, in this context, in a protest site. See Danielle Goldman, “Bodies on the Line: Contact Improvisation and Techniques of Non-Violent Protest,” in *I Want to Be Ready: Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010). Rebekah J. Kowal, “Staging the Greensboro Sit-Ins,” *TDR/The Drama Review* 48, no. 4 (December 2004): 135–54.

³⁵ Especially, as the event was held near Victoria Harbour, it also resonated with the laser show organized by the Hong Kong Tourism Board, “A Symphony of Light”, which ironically, is a daily performance of laser lights. While it is an iconic event for tourists, there are debates on whether the show truly represents the beauty of Hong Kong, and whether the government’s money was used wisely on whitewashing the city’s deeper economic and social issues. Local media link the signature Harbour

aspects of The Laser Pointers Show on August 7, and unfolding the cultural nuances behind this single event shows how one's sense of belonging and identity is entangled in acts of protest. Multiple cultural memories were embedded in the Laser Pointers Show, which occurred with only minimal planning or organizing. The result of this "Show" (in this particular show, the performance items were improvised, without a designated leader or producer), was a manifestation of moments of collective remembering. By performing these memories through dance and movement, and through the use of cultural symbols such as pop music, a sense of Hong Kong community was created, if temporarily, amidst the tumult of the ongoing political turmoil.

Like the Demosisto flash mobs, people in the Laser Pointers Show curated the evening using laser pointers as symbolic devices. Both parties deliberately transformed public spaces through the coalescing of bodies and sound. The dancing bodies and the singing voices serve to enact this transformation. This process, utilizing their bodies and voices, facilitates individuals to announce their existence to the public, and to reclaim the public as a form of resistance. Demosisto sang in the MTR system and performed flash mobs on the street, performing everyday actions in ways that aim to expose the contradictions surrounding the National Anthem Law. Similarly, people in the Laser Pointers Show re-defined the laser pointer as a playful, ordinary object, as opposed to the police's injunction against the laser pointer as an "offensive weapon". In doing so, these events show how bodily coordination, movement and sound come together to enact political aspirations in often creative and meaningful ways.

Conclusion

Both events discussed above allow participants to reclaim one's status as part of the public, but not subordinated to any authority. Reading these protest performances through such a lens will strengthen our understanding of seemingly random and spontaneous events, and unfold the deeper meanings of such public action. Much ink has been spilt on the relationship between collective singing and state-building, such as works on "musical heritage" and on how songs work can serve the purposes of nation-building, as well as the importance of contrafacta as a means of resistance.³⁶ This article, however, highlights the embodied singing as a process with both conformity and incongruity, with singing and dancing as forms of civic participation, where people negotiate and challenge meanings of national symbols, reimagining the use of public space.

The cases mentioned above illustrate a process of negotiation, manifested in bodily movements, gestures, and singing voices, as people strive to make sense of their relationship with statehood and peoplehood. The Chinese words for negotiation are 談判 *taam4 pun3* (literally means 談-talk and 判-judge) and 交涉 *gaau1 sip3* (literally means 交-interact and 涉-walking across the water - as a metaphor for the process). Interestingly, the Chinese characters for the word 身份 *san1 fan2* (identity) imply an external

Front Light Show to the Laser Pointers Show, see "Hongkongers Create Own Harbourfront Light Show after Activist Arrested over Laser Pointer 'offensive Weapon' - Hong Kong Free Press HKFP," accessed January 31, 2023, <https://hongkongfp.com/2019/08/07/hongkongers-create-harbourfront-light-show-activist-arrested-laser-pointer-offensive-weapon/>.

³⁶ David Lowenthal, "From Harmony of the Spheres to National Anthem: Reflections on Musical Heritage," *GeoJournal* 65, no. 1–2 (February 1, 2006): 3–15, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10708-006-0008-y>; Lily Kong, "Music and Cultural Politics: Ideology and Resistance in Singapore," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 20, no. 4 (1995): 447–59, <https://doi.org/10.2307/622975>.

recognition, wherein *san1*-身 suggests body, social status and birthplace. However, the concept of *san1 fan2* does not imply whether one has full autonomy of their *san1*身-their body. The idea of *san1 fan2* is one of a noun turning into a verb, a status of being, which relies on whether one sees identity as a process, a “doing”. The process of “doing” identities is never entirely free and without external pressures and limitations. As Butler writes, “There is a modicum of freedom within our scene of constraint.”³⁷ Through repetition of one’s performance of citizenship, as the cases and musical works in this chapter have demonstrated, a space opens for critique and resistance. By highlighting the performative politics in Hong Kong’s protest performances, this article provides insights into how struggles over notions of Hong Kong identity are “choreographed” and “sung” in forms of dance and bodily movements, concerning everyday spaces of sound, collective bodies and the memories that lived within.

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³⁷ Tracy McMullen, “Improvisation within a Scene of Constraint: An Interview with Judith Butler,” in *Negotiated Moments: Improvisation, Sound, and Subjectivity*, ed. Gillian Siddall and Ellen Waterman, Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 22.

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