

Occupational Ethnography in the Taiwan Sunflower and Hong Kong Umbrella Movements

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On March 18, 2014, several hundred Taiwanese student and civil activists broke into the Legislative Yuan, the parliament of the contested island nation, launching the Sunflower Movement, a protest against the ruling

Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) and aligned business elites' alleged collusion with authoritarian China to pass a highly controversial trade deal. It took 24 days of occupation and a rally of half a million people to make the KMT capitulate. A coalition of pro-independence and left-wing activists emerged triumphant.

[Taiwan's political fate, and with it, China's territorial ambitions writ large, suddenly became an open question again, as I recently wrote in the Journal of Asian Studies.](#)

Less than half a year later, Hong Kong students entered the walled-off plaza of their own Legislative Council during a demonstration for "genuine universal suffrage," the right to elect a leader of their own choosing. After

87 rounds of police tear gas failed to disperse the crowds, Hong Kong's streets swelled with protesters and supporters, and the student movement and the long-planned Occupy Central campaign won world attention as they morphed into the Umbrella Movement, including 79 days of occupation of central government and commercial districts. [For a time, it even looked as if we might be witnessing the birth of an "Asian Spring".](#) Ultimately, the movement was dispersed before achieving its policy goals, but Hong Kong will never be the same.

The Sunflower and Umbrella Movements shared ideals, tactics, foes, and, to a lesser extent, personnel. They both trumpeted democracy, self-determination, rationality, and peace. They both occupied streets, blocked traffic, sustained sophisticated tent cities, and defied attempts at police dispersal and gangster intimidation. They both targeted not only their local administrations, but those institutions' complicated ties with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), as well as the CCP itself. [Hong Kong activists also visited Taiwan during and after the Sunflower Movement, and Taiwanese attempted, not always successfully, to enter Hong Kong to support their counterparts.](#)

The two movements shared me, too. I was at both, almost from the beginning. In Taiwan, [I climbed a ladder into the Legislative Yuan the morning after the initial break-in](#) and then spent most of the next 23 days in or around the building. Immediately after the first tear gas shots were fired in Hong Kong, I booked tickets from Taipei and ended up joining the occupation for over one month on two separate trips. While I was not born or raised in these places, and my embodiment disallows me from passing as a "local" despite my linguistic and cultural facility, I have lived, loved, worked and studied in both for years prior to these uprisings. And while concerned friends and family wisely warned me of the many risks of involvement, as an ethnographer with research and personal interests in these movements, participation seemed worth the possibility of being arrested, blacklisted, or worse.



Sunflower-Occupied Legislative Yuan, 1 April 2014. Photo courtesy Ian Rowen

How did this positionality affect my research? Not wanting to admit the legitimacy of Hong Kong's home-grown discontent, the CCP and its media organs systematically portrayed Occupy Central as a US plot to destabilize China. Citing weak personal and financial links to the US National Endowment for Democracy, they claimed that Occupy Central's academic figurehead, Hong Kong University law professor Benny Tai, and media champion, Apple Daily owner Jimmy Lai, were CIA stooges. Dan Garrett, a former US intelligence analyst and current student at the City University of Hong Kong, suffered surveillance and smear attempts as a purported spy "mastermind". Knowing that my presence as a US national and recent Fulbright Fellow (partially funded by the US State Department) could likewise be spun by professional propagandists as evidence of US conspiracy, I did take pause before pitching my tent in the heart of the largest encampment at Admiralty.



Bus as free-speech canvas: "For those who thinks that foreigners have nothing to do with Hong Kong, We have only one thing to say to them. 'Our skins might be dark but our hearts aren't.'" Mong Kok, Hong Kong, 1 October 2014. Photo courtesy Ian Rowen

But by then, I had learned from Taiwan Sunflower's trial by fire that it would be impossible to deeply research this movement without inhabiting and taking part in it, and so I did. This required building trust with activists. From performing intellectual tasks— assisting with translations and communications, connecting international press with local activists, and providing whatever advice I could (when asked), to the more mundane but no less necessary— watching for security threats, distributing food, and cleaning public spaces— I was by no means at an "objective" remove from my field of research. And it would be disingenuous to claim that my affective ties to neighboring occupiers did not color my vision.

Such issues of positionality are nothing new to anthropologists who have happily moved past the vacuous, pseudo-scientific "view from nowhere" claimed by earlier ethnographers. Yet, even as it forced reflexivity, the view from my banner-strewn tent presented other vexing questions. One of my research projects was interviewing mainland Chinese visitors to the Hong Kong occupation sites. Sitting at "home" on Harcourt Road sometimes allowed for easy recruitment with sympathetic passers-by, but occasionally also alienated other informants. It even led on several occasions to heated arguments between hostile mainlanders and local activists on my "porch". This required me to mix up my location and even my choice of fashion—to choose, for example, whether or not to wear the yellow ribbon of the movement activist— depending on who I intended to interview and what kinds of answers I might expect to elicit.

And what answers, if any, were drawn during this research?

Although I suggest that the Taiwan Sunflower and Hong Kong Umbrella Movements compose a common struggle, they were planned separately and played out in very different ways.

Sunflower sprouted in Taiwan, a politically complex place often



Tent with a View, Admiralty, Hong Kong, 17 November 2014. Photo Courtesy Ian Rowen

poorly understood by non-specialists. It was largely ignored by the global press, but its demands were met, it led to the November 2014 mid-term electoral defeat of the ruling party, and likely redirected Taiwan's geopolitical future. It also inspired activists in Hong Kong to push harder than they might have otherwise.

Hong Kong's movement, while it has not yet achieved its goal of "genuine universal suffrage," is not over. A city usually portrayed as apathetic and apolitical has demonstrated a surprising degree of resistance. Umbrella activists continue staging mobile demonstrations across the Special Administrative Region. Tidy narratives of China's rise under the CCP are punctuated by increasingly loud dissent from within its claimed territory. Even as hundreds of mainland Chinese continue sitting in prison for expressing online support for the Umbrella Movement, the brave mainlanders I interviewed in the occupation continue walking free, circulating images and words from their times in the recent near-revolutionary moment, even if they didn't always agree with it. And there are many, many more where they came from.

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*Editors' note: the SEAA editors are organizing a series of articles comparing the two recent social movements: the Sunflower Movement in Taiwan and the Umbrella Protest in Hong Kong. Please email Heidi K Lam (heidi.lam@yale.edu) and Yi Zhou (yizhou@ucdavis.edu) to submit suggestions or if you are interested in contributing a paper on this topic. Please send news items, contributions and comments to SEAA Contributing Editors **Heidi K Lam** (heidi.lam@yale.edu) or **Yi Zhou** (yizhou@ucdavis.edu).*



"HONG KONG IS (NOT) A PART OF CHINA"
Bus stop on occupied Nathan Road, Mong Kok, Hong Kong, 20 November 2015. Image courtesy Ian Rowen