Can a Colonial Flag become a Banner for Democracy? The Case of the Dragon and Lion Flag in the 2019 Hong Kong Protests

Filipe Carreira da Silva

(Institute of Social Sciences of the University of Lisbon/Selwyn College, Cambridge)

Julius Rogenhofer

(Department of Sociology, University of Cambridge)

Abstract

Why did Hong Kong protestors choose a symbol of former oppression – the old colonial flag — as a banner for their fight for democracy, rights, and autonomy in 2019? We propose to answer this puzzle by studying the colonial-era flag as a displacement device. The waving of the colonial-era flag is shown to induce non-linear temporal and extraterritorial displacements, as well as contradictory interpretations of Hong Kong's core values, national sovereignty, and cultural identity. The flag's displacements are amplified against the contested colonial history of the former British enclave. Conceptually, this pragmatic definition of the flag moves beyond approaches that study flags as representations of a structure of symbolic meaning. The flag is neither an unimportant prop nor is it a free-floating signifier; its materiality elicits significant political effects. Methodologically, this translates into an exploration of the flag's second-order agency. The politics of the old colonial-era Hong Kong flag, in combination with discourse and institutional arrangements, is shown to be integral to contentious politics. The flag and its displacements shed new light on a city uneasy with its past, dissatisfied with its present, and uncertain about its future.

Key Words: Flags, Material Culture, Nationalism, Imagined Communities, Hong Kong, China

Introduction

As Antony Dapiran, a chronicler of Hong Kong's long and rich history of protest, aptly puts it, this is a city uncomfortable with its history, unhappy with its present and unsure of its future (2017: 206). In the summer of 2019, Hong Kongers' disquiet found an outlet in the largest wave of public protests since 2014. In 2014, the Umbrella Movement had successfully used a series of sit-ins to occupy and paralyze parts of central Hong Kong, thereby garnering worldwide admiration. While the Umbrella Movement protesters took issue with an election system that pre-selected candidates for their loyalty to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the trigger for protests in 2019 was Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam's attempt to pass an extradition law that would enable Hong Kongers to face trial in mainland China. Protests against CCP encroachment on Hong Kong affairs soon escalated into demands that Hong Kongers' freedoms of speech, assembly and protest be respected, interspersed with calls for independence and democratic self-rule. On 1 July 2019, hundreds of protesters stormed Hong Kong's seat of government: the Legislative Council Complex (LegCo). To the bewilderment of domestic and international onlookers, the intruders defaced the official emblem of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR) and draped Hong Kong's British colonial era flag over the speaker's podium. Photographs of the incident were soon splashed across the frontpages of newspapers and captured the attention of television anchors and social media algorithms. One alien object provoked immediate controversy – the British colonial flag, in use from 1959 until 1997, now deployed seemingly to demand the end of Chinese oppression. How could one flag stand-in for such opposing notions as colonial rule and political emancipation? What enables the same material artifact to dislocate our attention from the "here and now" of the protests to both the distant past of British colonial rule and the uncertain future of Hong Kong's civil liberties and democratic aspirations?

These are important questions for at least two different reasons. First, despite the ubiquity of things, there is relatively little attention devoted to the roles performed by symbolic objects in contentious politics (but see Abrams and Gardner, forthcoming). By and large, social and political scientists study behaviour, namely meaningful speech and discourse. Important as this might be, it is insufficient. Material culture is an integral part of social experience, and the study of contentious politics should not ignore it. Taking the materiality of contentious politics seriously, however, does not mean succumbing to a flat ontology, in which question of power are neglected and all actants are accorded the same agency (Latour, 2005). As the primary wielders of agency, humans are enabled and constrained in their endeavours by objects, which – in specific contexts – can exercise a degree of secondary agency. Even though objects lack intentionality and personhood, which means they are not self-sufficient agents, they nonetheless act as secondary agents that have significant effects by virtue of being enmeshed in social arrangements (Gell 1998). We believe that the material and relational dimensions of political agency must be thought together. Not all objects are equal – an object's specific affordances (as recognised and interpreted by human beings) are crucial to understanding their political significance.

Our principal objects of study, flags, can unite and divide crowds, express longing or trigger imagination, spark controversy or instil violence, not least during moments of unrest. Contentious politics, intent on effecting social change through collective action, bring an added intensity to the waving of flags and to the symbolic power of the flag itself. Flags enhance the affective impact of participation in public rallies and protests. The preparation of objects of protest, including by sowing and carrying them, forges connections between demonstrators. Depending on the situation and their relative position vis-à-vis the protestors' bodies, they can signal belonging or exclusion, resistance or domination, appeasement or

fury, victory or defeat. In short, words matter, but so do things – and national flags can be powerful signifiers when questions of collective identity and nation-building are concerned.

Second, in Hong Kong, questions of identity and nationhood are inextricably linked with the global history of colonialism. Brandishing a colonial-era flag in a protest in 2019 brings back memories of British rule in the territory. That Hong Kong was ever a British colony, of course, is something that China has consistently rejected. Already in 1972, immediately after China's joining the United Nations, Beijing ensured to have Hong Kong and Macao removed from a U.N. list of colonies, effectively stripping them of their right to self-determination. The aim of the then-Chinese leader Mao Zedong was clear and entirely in line with later day leaderships: to bring Hong Kong from British rule directly back to Chinese rule, without letting the enclave ever becoming independent. China's interpretation of the past stands in stark contrast with the Western view, which protestors were intent on reclaiming. Western historiographical accounts typically involve two wars, two treaties and a century and a half of colonial administration (for an account that stresses the role of late 1800s Hong Kong Chinese businessmen, see Carroll, 2006). After the first and second Opium Wars, the colonial status of the territory was settled in a pair of 19th century treaties. This included the granting of a 99-year lease in 1898 to the New Territories, which greatly expanded the size of the colony. As a result, with the exception of Japanese occupation from 1941 to 1945, Hong Kong was a British colony from 1841 until its handover to Chinese rule in 1997. This narrative is contested by the Chinese Communist Party, which seized power during a civil war in 1949. In the view of the CCP, the former Qing Dynasty was compelled to sign what it calls "unequal treaties" (Chan, 1996: 12) following military defeats and therefore the said treaties are void. This position underpins China's unwillingness in the late 20th century to extend the lease on the New Territories, making the territory effectively unviable without them. Eventually, this would force Britain to enter into protracted and often

contentious negotiations with Beijing over the return of Hong Kong to Chinese rule. In 1997, China takes back control of Hong Kong under a "one country, two systems" arrangement, which would ensure the separation of the economic, political and judicial systems of Hong Kong and mainland China for 50 years. Even though this arrangement results from a 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration registered with the United Nations, China now refuses to recognize the agreement.

These contrasting interpretations of the past give added meaning to the protestors' choice to brandish the old colonial-era flag in 2019. It can be read as a direct rebuke of China's sovereignty claim over the territory. This suggests that, more than mere nostalgia for a lost paradise, what protestors' personal accounts seemed to indicate was a general willingness to dislocate this object of the past into a politics of the future, in particular a democratic future for their homeland. As we detail below, these practices and perceptions point to the flag's ability to help transport social actors to another political reality, and its capacity to convey contradictory meanings.

The article is organised as follows. In the next section, we present our theory and methods. Drawing upon pragmatism, flags are revealed to function as displacement devices: flags not only help displace human agents (protestors waving flags and onlookers alike) across time and space, but also carry contradictory messages within themselves. The following two sections document these displacements. First, we discuss the spatial and temporal displacements afforded by the colonial-era flag. This discussion enables our analysis not merely of a politics of memory and cultural trauma at play in the territory, but also of a politics of the future. Next, we explore the contradictory meanings associated with the flag. These range from the consecration of the flag as a pro-democracy medium to its vilification as an imperialist tool. The article concludes with a brief reflection on Hong Kong's current political, economic, and cultural predicaments.

The Flag as a Displacement Device: Theory and Methods

In this article, we define flags as displacement devices, i.e., material objects whose characteristics help human agents to be carried to different times and geographies as well as carrying contradiction within themselves as they remain open to divergent uses and interpretations. As illustrated below, these two types of displacement have emerged from our study of the 2019 protests as the most prevalent in testimonies and first-hand accounts of the events.

The concept of a displacement device that induces specific effects in human agents (protestors and onlookers) has a pragmatic character that can be traced back to Peirce's semiotics (Medway et al. 2019). Pragmatists (see also Mead 2010) focus on materiality of the flag. They view the flag as a socially constructed object whose material characteristics exist in constant interplay with human agency, norms and institutions. The pragmatic focus on materiality, in other words, avoids idealist accounts that reduces flags to mere vehicles of moral and political meaning without falling back into materialist analyses. This balancing act can be seen from the outset. While Peirce agreed with Saussure that symbolic signs (numbers, characters, and letters) and their referents are arbitrarily related to each other, he shifts our attention towards the indispensable role of human interpreters. Peircean semiotics identifies indexes and icons as two non-arbitrary modes of relationship between signs and their referents. Indices focus attention but cannot exist independently from their objects (1955: 109): a loud bang signals a collision or an explosion, smoke signals fire. Icons, in turn, formally resemble their objects, though the resemblance between the signifier and the signified need not be tangible. Flags often play on resemblances with the imagined communities they claim to represent: the red maple leaf on the Canadian flag evokes the

country's natural environment, while the flag of Cyprus features the shape of the island on a white background.

Crucially, Peirce stresses that meaning-production often involves a combination of all three modes. For Peirce, a flag is a symbol-index-icon. According to Peirce, then, the flag remains a condensed focus of emotional energy; but, Peirce adds, the flag's symbolic effect results both from its material production (from graphic development to the sewing machine) and its social life, which includes its formal and informal use. In short, from a pragmatic perspective, flags exist as historical objects with a complex performativity that includes their hoisting and waving, but also their burning and tearing. Without an account of their materiality, to put it in slightly different terms, one cannot see how flags work as vehicles for political-moral meaning – but also as things, as hardware.

This understanding of flags as displacement devices whose materiality involves a specific kind of politics seems to complement existing studies of flags. This literature goes back to Durkheim's discussion of the national flag to illustrate his theory of totemism in *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1995: 222), and addresses themes of nationalism, sacrifice, and collective effervescence in a range of contexts and geographies (Tiryakian, 1995, 2005). The effect of flags on political perceptions and their appropriation by social movements are widely studied (Schatz and Lavine, 2007). Yet, the complex and multi-layered contests over meaning that underpin the use, interpretation and contestation of flags in contemporary contests for democracy and civil rights remains underexplored (one exception is Jaskulowski, 2016). The significance of flags in Hong Kong's decade long struggle with questions of popular sovereignty and the rule of law is a case in point. Though increasingly conscious of the emergence of new localist cultural identities in Hong Kong (Holbig, 2020; Lowe and Yuk-Ha Tsang, 2018), studies of civil disobedience in the city have yet to elaborate on the implications of flags and flag waving.

We propose to address this gap in the literature by focusing on Hong Kong's British colonial-era flag. Our study will account for the ways in which it not merely represents another reality and conveys different meanings – but incorporates them. This incorporation is closely linked to the flag's materiality, i.e., the social uses afforded by its material agency. In short, we analyse what demonstrators do with the flag and what the flag does them. We attempt to answer these questions with the help of various visual methods (Doerr and Milman, 2014), including the content analysis of press-photo coverage of the protests, as well as protestors' testimonies and interviews with protest event organizers. Although we do not claim to exhaust all possible displacements afforded by the flag, each type of displacement discussed below is supported by at least two independent textual sources.[1]

Carrying protestors across time and space

Through their affective engagement with the flag, which they purchased or sowed and carried to the streets with them, Hong Kong protestors – flag-wavers and onlookers alike – found the old colonial flag producing an unlikely yet powerful effect. It helped carry them, albeit in different ways, to a different time. Indeed, as testimonies make clear, several temporal associations, some of them non-linear, were induced by the demonstrators' physical interaction with the flag. For instance, protestors waving flags were carried to a distant past, a past where 'Hong Kong's Core Values' (Dapiran, 2017: 31) were forged through their

[1] Over one hundred photos were consulted for data analysis. The period of information collection spans from March to December 2019, although the movement would not subside until autumn 2021, when the Hong Kong Alliance was disbanded, and Student Politicism dissolved. The sources of media where these photos were collected and analysed include traditional media outlets, such as international news agencies, newspapers and magazines, as well as personal blogs and websites. Interviews and personal statements of protestors involved in the 2019 events were collected indirectly from similar sources and quoted accordingly.

ancestors' riotous protests against the British authorities. At the same time, this displacement paved the way for a projection of a future democratic Hong Kong. Protestors were not displaced temporally only, however. Holding and waving the flag helped them feel transported beyond and away from the city's strict territorial confines. Their demands for civil liberties and democratic self-rule made protesters feel part of a larger community of democratic countries. Some onlookers, in turn, were transported to a past of national humiliation, Western interference, and territorial disunity. Their support for Beijing meant that the colonial-era flag was construed as a medium of offense and opprobrium. How are we to account for such contradictory displacements?

To begin, let us return to Durkheim's discussion of the national flag. Via Saussurian linguistics, Durkheim's interest in systems of symbolic classification inspired the works of structuralist and post-structuralist thinkers alike. A case in point is Roland Barthes, whose seminal work on social and literary semiotics in the mid-1950s touched upon both the colonial question and the functions of national flags. Yet, whilst Durkheim stressed the impact of external structures on individual agents via material artifacts – the soldier, he points out, "forgets that the flag is only a symbol that has no value in itself but only brings to mind the reality it represents" – Barthes's aim is to show that we inhabit a phantasmatic world composed by material artifacts whose meaning is entirely arbitrary. Barthes's poststructuralist emphasis on arbitrariness abandons materiality altogether. In Barthes' analysis of the 25-26 June 1955 issue of *Paris Match*, the *Tricolor* is notable primarily for its absence from the magazine's cover image (1973). Instead, we see the face of a young African boy wearing a military beret, staring past the audience at something we can only speculate is the French national flag. The absolute arbitrariness of the signifier suggests, not only that the invisible imaginary object is the *Tricolor*, but that it represents the French colonial empire. It follows from Barthes's semiological analysis that the same sign could just as easily capture

the colonial imprint of Britain's Union Jack – or, indeed, Hong Kong's colonial-era flag. If Barthes moves beyond Durkheim in stressing that structures are not necessarily mechanical external forces determining human action, but are themselves contingent and arbitrary, he reduces agency to the point of irrelevance. Colonial authorities seldom allowed colonised territories to have their own flags, and when they did a colony's flag was placed in a subordinate and dependent position vis-à-vis the coloniser's national flag. For Barthes, this historical fact exhausts all symbolic possibilities of representation other than that of colonial oppression and thus perpetuates an understanding of society around the coloniser's national political ideology.

Reality, however, often destabilizes post-structuralist language schemes. Colonial resistance is a possibility lurking behind every colonial project. Subversion, irony, mimicry, creativity, and imagination are powerful tools to question authority and devise alternative scenarios for the future. This possibility is powerfully illustrated by Hong Kong's vibrant protest culture, spanning both Cultural Revolution-inspired protests against its British Colonisers and potent vigils to commemorate the CCP's massacre at Beijing's Tiananmen Square. Ironically enough, the local tourist industry once capitalized on this tradition. The 2012 *Lonely Planet* guide to Hong Kong recommended that visitors immerse themselves in the effervescent local scene of protest, with rallies "infused with theatrics and eruptions of song, dance and poetry, reflecting the city's vibrant indie music and literary scenes." In fact, this carnivalesque atmosphere, in part a pseudo-Mardi Gras construction for tourist consumption and partly a genuine bohemian transgressive scene of protest, contributed decisively to the heterotopic affordances of the flag.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

Collective memory and cultural trauma play a significant role in the spatial and temporal displacements induced by the British colonial-era flag. The flag's well-known origin story is a case in point. Forged in the experience of captivity endured by a young British officer in the hands of the Japanese army, the original sketch brings together the colony's connection with Britain and its dependence on sea communications and trade – both severed during Japanese occupation. Crucially, this history unites the Chinese and British in their shared encounter with Japanese expansionism: in principle the colonial flag might carry both anti-Beijing protestors and pro-Beijing onlookers towards a shared memory of victimhood at the hands of a common enemy (Fan, 2019: 26). The battle of Hong Kong in 1941, which led to the invasion of the territory and the atrocities that were to follow, is depicted in the embattling. A fairly common element of heraldry (the embattlements of castles stand for warfare), this particular embattling occupies the central position in the flag's design. Every other element is positioned around it. Above the embattling, there is the Crest featuring a Royal Lion with the Imperial Crown holding a pearl, representing a popular description of Hong Kong as the 'Pearl of the Orient.' At each side there are the Supporters, symbolizing the Sino-British character of the city. Around the crest there is the Shield containing a Naval Crown, an indication of the role of the Navy and the Merchant Navy. Below, there are two stylized junks, connoting the trade typical of the Pearl River delta and the South China sea more broadly. Part historical account, part mythological narrative, the origin story of Hong Kong's official flag between 1959 and 1997 permeates many of its present-day deployments: in particular, its forging during one of the greatest cultural traumas of the twentieth century, induces displacements to a time of war, occupation, and survival.

Some displacements, however, do not induce flag-wavers and onlookers to recall a past when Britain and China were equal victims of external aggression. On the contrary, they depict the Chinese as victims of British aggression. The Royal Lion is there to represent the

proud history of the British colonial empire, whereas the Chinese Dragon cannot forget the humiliating defeat in the First Opium War and the eventual surrender of the territory to the British in 1842. As testimonies suggest, this kind of heterotopic displacement is far more common among pro-Beijing onlookers (Sheridan, 2019: 2). Feelings of victimhood and resentment go a long way to explain how the colonial-era flag can be construed as a symbol of imperialist intervention in China's domestic affairs.

An even more distant displacement also has its roots in the legacies of the British empire: the rule of law. Often mythologized as a continuous tradition stretching all the way back to the Magna Carta, the Glorious Revolution of 1655 and the modern liberal tradition of parliamentary democracy, this particular displacement portrays British colonialism as in large parts benign and progressive, particularly among pro-democracy protestors. This displacement was powerfully reinforced by protestors playing "Last Post" to commemorate the death of Chow Tsz-lok, a 22-year-old presumed student protester, on 8 November: the combined effect a song used in Commonwealth nations to honour soldiers killed in action and the hoisting of the colonial flag carried students directly "to an imperial tradition, of which Hong Kong used to be an integral part" (Kramm, 2020).

Other displacements involve memories of a more recent past (Fan, 2019: 6). Perhaps the most prominent of these displacements brings flag-wavers back to the mid-1960s, to an era when poverty, inequality and exclusion led to violent riots and ultimately to sweeping social reforms in the territory. The 1967 riots feature prominently in Hong Kongers' collective imagination as the moment when, through collective action, they secured a set of socio-economic rights comparable to most Western developed nations at the time. The colonial flag's relative position in these events is decidedly ambivalent. On the one hand, it was the professed object of the ire of pro-Communist demonstrators fighting the British colonial administration (Shi, 2019: 4). On the other, this seeming obstacle to the social justice

demands of Hong Kongers, eventually gives way to British endorsement and at least a partial fulfilment of these democratic demands. It is this latter meaning that is invoked, time and again, by anti-Beijing protestors waving the old colonial-era flag, sometimes accompanied by older Hong Kongers who once took part in the 1967 riots.

A second, even more recent displacement involves the 1989 student protests in Tiananmen Square (Fan, 2019: 16). From May 1989, when martial law is declared in Beijing, to the June crackdown and beyond, Hong Kongers were among the most vocal supporters of the students. On 28 May, when news of the eminent crackdown begins to circulate, one of largest protests in Hong Kong's history occurs. Out of a population of less than six million, an estimated 1.5 million people take to the streets, a turnout only surpassed in the 2019 protests. Attesting to the importance of flags in contentious politics, on 28 June 1990, China passes the National Flag Law as part of a broader programme of national education (Zhao, 1998: 299). Less than a decade before the handover of the territory to the CCP, Hong Kongers' fears and anxieties seemed to foreshadow the city's current predicament – "First China, then Hong Kong," as one popular slogan put it.

In this context, the old colonial flag represents the 'secular utopia' that human rights represent today, less a juridical concept than a moral-political category involving a concatenation of demands and aspirations around recognition, voice and redistribution. As Hong Kongers were keen to stress twenty years after the events, Tiananmen is not 'history' (Leung and Cheung, 2009). Indeed, the displacement 'back' to Tiananmen is decidedly future-oriented. While individual protesters may harbour nostalgia for a bygone era, the flag's invocation of colonial Hong Kong does not represent a retrogressive desire to reinstate the past. Rather, to use Wang's characterisation of the localist movement, it is simultaneously about 'creating something new and getting back something lost' (2019: 427). Grandma Wong, a 63-year-old protester seen waving the Union Jack inside the LegCo building,

explained her missing British rule by stressing that in the colonial era she could *see the future* (Roantree, 2019). Waved alongside the Union Jack, the colonial-era flag points to a fight for democracy as an ongoing, open-ended project. Under the menacing shadow of '2047,' the year when the PRC's reintegration of the territory will be complete, their combined effect is reinforced.

The colonial-era flag, in short, induces various non-linear temporal associations and extraterritorial allusions in social agents. Carried to another place (in time and/or space), both flag-wavers and onlookers become agents, not only of a politics of memory, where cultural trauma and feelings of victimhood occupy a prominent role, but also of a politics of the future, oriented towards identity-formation and institution-building. Our analysis of these effects joins a growing conversation about how social agents process an unknown future, namely the projective or anticipatory dimension of political action (e.g., Mische, 2009). Beyond transcending the 'here and now,' material artifacts can also induce other displacements that significantly influence political contests by bringing contradiction to the fore. It is to these displacements that we turn next.

Carrying Contradiction Within the Flag Itself

In this section, we explore the contradiction carried within Hong Kong's colonial-era flag. Our premise is that all objects are open to contradictory uses and interpretations, often carrying radically different meanings. What is true of every object it is even more pronounced for sacred objects, such as national flags, whose definition involves utmost emotional investment on the part of the political community (Hargreaves, 2000). Hong Kong's colonial-era flag offers an excellent opportunity to observe how a material artifact affords different types of displacement to generate powerful political effects. As we show

next, either in isolation, or in combination, the ability of a thing to carry contradiction within itself can be a mighty sword.

Contemporary uses of Hong Kong's colonial-era flag seem notoriously ambivalent. How can a flag designed and introduced by a colonising power be taken to represent democracy, self-rule, and freedom for a colonised people? The answer to this question, which can be traced back to the divergent interpretations of the enclave's colonial history, is the most significant displacement induced by this material artifact. The flag is directly responsible for some of the most intense, confrontational, and mercurial political reactions on the part of both CCP supporters and pro-democracy protesters. In occupied university campuses, city streets and the stormed LegCo building flag-wavers and onlookers were *carried to* Hong Kong core values, a combination of freedom, human rights, democracy, the rule of law and clean governance. These values are closely interrelated with the territory's tradition of protest. Earned and defended in a contentious and non-linear process, both from British colonial authorities (who only granted these protections reluctantly and in response to widespread public uprisings) or against a CCP-sanctioned government (that has repeatedly attempted to curtail hard-earned rights and freedoms), they have nonetheless become part of Hong Kong's "civil religion" (Bellah, 1967). In the lead up to the 1997 handover, Hong Kong's core values gained unprecedented political-juridical coherence through their codification in the post-handover constitution. This enshrined status notwithstanding, doubts about the CCP's willingness to uphold its commitments coincided with a resurfacing of the colonial flag in local protests (Sheridan, 2019: 2). The British colonial flag began to represent Hong Kong's core values. Despite this early *association* it was not until the 2019 anti-extradition bill protests that the flag becomes their *materialisation*.

A key milestone in the process of materialisation occurs on 1 July 2019. It involves the protesters' decision to wave foreign and colonial era flags during the storming of the LegCo

building. A combination of video footage and photographic records enables us to reconstruct the timeline of the protest as it unfolded in real time (*South China Morning Post*, 2020; see also Fan, 2019: 3; Sheridan, 2019: 1). The first scene occurs moments after protesters burst into the parliament chamber. It involves the desecration of the official Hong Kong SAR emblem. Surrounded and shielded by what looks like a mountain of umbrellas, a protestor taints the emblem with black spray paint. This moment is captured by the lens of Reuters photojournalist Tyrone Siu, whose shot soon reverberates in the global news media and eventually wins the Pulitzer Prize. The second scene unfolds shortly thereafter. Protestors disband, leaving behind an emptied chamber. Backgrounded on the wall, we see the defaced official emblem. In the front, a new, unexpected object captures the room. Our attention is geared towards an unfolded Hong Kong's colonial-era flag, proudly draped over the chamber's central podium for the world to see. Displayed in this manner the flag does not merely represent or indicate resistance against an authoritarian regime that disrespects the core values of democracy and human rights (Ortmann, 2015). Both a symbol and an index for those values, it is now something more – it is their *icon*, the mobile materialisation of Hong Kong's core values.

The flag's newly acquired iconicity, however, became a site of intense emotional struggle, able to carry those who hold it to the realm of democratic promise. Brandishing a sacred object sanctifies those who hold it. Yet, as the Greek myth of Icarus reminds us, proximity with the sacred often carries the ultimate price. This is particularly true for all those who engage in direct public physical manipulation of the sacred object: holding and waving the colonial flag in front of a multitude of cameramen and photojournalists becomes a matter of life or death. As the suicide notes that several former protestors left before taking their lives make clear, martyrdom was always a possibility waiting to happen (Hollingsworth, Shelley and Coren, 2019). By contrast, pro-Beijing onlookers are confronted with the

emotional weight of profanity. Many feel aggravated, even incensed, at the desacralisation of an official state symbol (Holland, 2019: 4). This sense of profanity is made worse by protesters' brandishing of the old colonial-era flag. The juxtaposition of these icons – one defaced, another displayed – raises the stakes exponentially. A rebellious act is now a full-fledged afront.

It would be wrong, however, to infer from this singular ritual performance that flag waving protesters are a singular, homogenous block. They are not. To begin with, the flag was adopted as a symbol primarily by a small group called the Hong Kong Autonomy Movement. This vocal but tiny group's demands range from democracy and self-rule to better housing and support for local industry and agriculture (Sheridan, 2019). Other individuals using the flag may or may not have shared this specific combination of demands. More importantly, of well over a million protesters taking the streets in the summer of 2019, only a few hundred individuals stormed the LegCo building. Most demonstrators flew their flags in peaceful protests in front of embassies and throughout the city. Heterogeneity extends to the protesters' views on the precise political implications that derive from Hong Kong's core values. While unified in their normative commitment to them, there is no consensus about whether Hong Kong should strive to reaffirm the promise of "one country, two systems" or whether it should embark on a utopian path of independence from the PRC. Crucially, the brandishing of British, American and colonial-era flags at anti-government rallies has stirred intense controversy among protesters, who fear that their symbolism plays into Beijing's hands. From this perspective, the colonial flag is a fitting representation of both the promise and limitations of Hong Kongers' struggle to control their destiny. Capable of evoking a set of liberal values and a trajectory of gradual democratization, the flag's original meaning as symbol of colonial rule reinforces Hong Kong's cultural marginality and lack of autonomy (Wang, 2019).

The issue of autonomy sits at the heart of a second type of displacement the flag affords to those who wave it in a politically contentious context: it induces them to imagine an autonomous, national sovereign Hong Kong (Fan, 2019: 2; Sheridan, 2019: 2). Dapiran traces this displacement back to the Umbrella Movement of 2014. He recalls meeting a group of youngsters waving Hong Kong's colonial flag. "The flag," they told him in halting English, "was a symbol of their rejection of Chinese rule and desire for an independent Hong Kong, rather than for the return of their British overlords" (2017: 204-205). Dapiran's observation is consistent with a 2001 survey of social attitudes among Hong Kong students toward the nation, which shows that the "Hong Kong flag is also important to the students (mean=2.83)" (Lee, 2003: 600). For most pro-Beijing onlookers, however, the flag invokes demands for separatism (Shi, 2019: 5). In line with the CCP's official party line, which portraits the colonial flag as a symbol of corrupt foreign influence, this interpretation paints the flag as inherently dangerous. The flag is said to steer protestors away from their rightful attachment to the homeland towards an exclusionary nationalism around their identity as Hong Kongers. The CCP's fears are not without justification. Oftentimes the flying of the colonial flag is accompanied with chants that "Hong Kong is not China" and skirmishes between protesters and riot police that together mount a threat to the Chinese sovereignty claim over Hong Kong. The CCP's own nationalist imaginary, as embodied by the official PRC and SAR flags, conflates "love of China" (爱国) with "love of the party" (爱党) – political dissent is by its very nature deemed unpatriotic and seditious (Dupré, 2020). Importantly for our purposes, this particular displacement is often articulated with another one involving time. In the CCP's self-understanding, China's sovereignty over Hong Kong marks a departure from over a century of humiliation at the hands of foreign intruders (Dupré, 2020). When Hong Kongers brandish colonial flags, they are not only challenge the CCP's grip over an important commercial hub, they imperil the CCP's grand

narrative about China's past, present and future. This combination of displacements goes a long way to explaining Beijing's relentless targeting and suppression of this otherwise anodyne piece of fabric.

Other displacements involving contradiction are not directly political but cultural. We refer to the civic dimension of Hong Kong's core values, namely to situations where the waving of flags reinforces protestors' commitment to Hong Kong's distinctive cultural identity (Fan, 2019: 5). Since the end of the Second World War, the city gradually established itself as a global capitalist hub, combining a prominent financial centre with sophisticated cultural venues and vibrant commercial activity. It is not difficult to understand how a flag, which acted as the official emblem of the city throughout most of this period, induces protestors to see themselves as culturally distinctive from mainland Chinese, who use a different (oral and written) language and whose many dissidents and exiles to Hong Kong brought stories of religious and political persecution with them from the mainland. Cultural difference is, however, a double-edge sword. For demonstrators waving the colonial flag, this particular flag is frequently associated with a culture of liberal individualism that helps them identify with Western cultural values. The pervasiveness of the English language, the embrace of commerce and the entrenchment of- and public attachment to institutions such as a free press and an independent judiciary, all compress the cultural distance between Hong Kong, the so-called pearl of the Orient, and London, the empire's metropolitan capital. By contrast, the cultural differences between Hong Kongers and mainlanders are amplified and the contiguous geographical position of the city to major Chinese cities such as Shenzhen and Guangzhou are backgrounded. As a result, a local cultural identity emerges that erases memories of colonial oppression and discrimination in favour of a selective appropriation of a few key cultural values, which help generate cultural distance towards the Chinese nation. This selective appropriation of the past is seen by some as invoking a longing for a bygone era. For Lim Tai Wei (cited in Holland, 2019), the flag

induces a sense of nostalgia among youths in Hong Kong, especially for the 1980s. Nostalgia here is a source of identification with a prosperous, free and vibrant cultural scene and a source of distinction from conformist and paternalistic mores.

Nostalgia, however, can be construed in many ways. For pro-Beijing onlookers, for instance, the 'blatant form of colonial nostalgia' induced by the colonial-era flag is blamed for polarizing the city's community (Shi, 2019: 5). This divisive sense of nostalgia is tied to an 'amnesiac tendency' to forget Hong Kong's place within China, instilling a sense of selfish localism (Lowe and Yuk-Ha Tsang, 2018: 560). Likewise, op-eds in party-friendly newspapers frequently portray the waving of the colonial-era flag as a sign of historical ignorance and confusion about the realities of 'Western narco-imperialism' in general and of British colonialism in particular, which treated Chinese people as second-class citizens in an 'apartheid state' (Goodrum, 2019). Protestors' forced entry into a government building was denigrated in party mouthpieces such as *China Daily* as treasonous, separatist, and akin to terrorism (Purbrick, 2020). This reading is not limited to official CCP's outlets. Scholars have raised genuine concerns about the emergence of an exclusionary localist identity among Hong Kongers. A case in point are Lowe and Yuk-Ha Tsang (2018), who tie racism and anti-mainland hostility to protestors' longing for a lost past that inspires a millenarian desire to restore the colonial era in the future. The sociological roots of this desire are traced back to reduced social mobility and rising economic inequality in post-handover Hong Kong. Crucial for this millenarian identity construction is the quasi-religious use of banners to ascribe a sense of sacredness onto public spaces within Hong Kong, a practice first illustrated by the mounting of a giant 'I want universal suffrage' banner on the city's Lion Rock Mountain. The contentious mobilization of the colonial-era flag in 2019 is, from this perspective, but the most recent sign of Hong Kongers' public assertion of their distinctive cultural identity, a claim squarely at odds with Chinese state ideology.

Conclusion

In mid-July 2019, photojournalists and cameramen brought to light the conundrum post-handover Hong Kong faces before "2047" finally arrives. Caught between a colonial past and the prospect of an authoritarian future, Hong Kongers live in a tumultuous present. Few things encapsulate this flickering situation better than the coloured piece of cloth that, for a brief moment, captured the world's attention – Hong Kong's colonial-era flag.

Protestors turned this flag into a symbol of their fight for democracy and human rights. Herein lies the puzzle this article set out to answer: Can a colonial flag become a banner for democracy? The flag is more than just a symbolic object, however. With the help of Durkheim, Barthes, and especially Peirce, we stress its iconicity – the flag *is* the fight for democracy and human rights. But it is also the *reaction* to that political protest, a reaction by the CCP and pro-Beijing Hong Kongers, who perceive it as a foreign violation of China's sovereignty. Underpinning this contradiction, one finds two opposing interpretations of the enclave's colonial past. On the one hand, the flag helps make protestors into freedom fighters and democracy activists, albeit at the cost of sidestepping everything that was problematic with British rule over the territory. On the other hand, as the CCP denies Hong Kong's colonial history and asserts China's continued sovereignty over the territory, the old colonial flag becomes an icon of the party's most feared project – Hong Kong's right to self-determination and democratic aspirations.

From the flag's human-mediated semiotic interaction with other things, this article shows, emerge significant effects. Anchored in the sight of the flag, these effects are imbued with emotions: either as passionate attachments to the project of democracy or as confused and disloyal displays of affection for foreign imperialism; either as heartfelt identification with the city's cultural values or as a reminder of the dangers of localism and separatism; either as the jointly remembered cultural trauma of Japanese occupation or as conflicting understandings of

the British colonial legacy. In each case, we documented how the flag induced powerful feelings within and through rituals of protest.

A better understanding of material things in contentious politics is one of this paper's principal contributions. This is one area where a pragmatic political sociology can expand on current explanations that (correctly) view political claim-making as inherently contestable. As the example of Hong Kong's colonial flag illustrates, political contestability is not merely a language game with a specific set of rules. By bringing the material world back into focus, pragmatism shows that by wrapping a flag around their body, using it to ornate mundane objects, or by simply holding the flag matter-of-factly – as a natural utensil – protestors make an array of political claims, all without uttering a single word.

Of course, public protest is seldom a silent affair. In the case of the 2019 anti-extradition bill protests, the waving of colonial-era flags was accompanied by loud chants verbalizing their demands. Out of this combination between bodies, things and speech emerged one of the most powerful, if ill-fated protests in the history of a territory that, since British took control in 1841, endured a turbulent and contentious politics. Our study shows how practices of flag-making and waving at protest marches in Hong Kong represent both an extension of this local tradition of protest and a break with existing habits and familiar forms of engagement, in response to new challenges. Such practices generate significant bonds of allegiance and solidarity. Collective flag-making, carrying, and waving and the displacements these practices afford create deep engagements among protestors. It is less clear, however, whether and how this new-found subjectivity will shape everyday life beyond the protests.

This brings us back to the initial insight that Hong Kong today is a place uncomfortable with its history, unhappy with its present and unsure of its future. Viewing the colonial flag as a displacement device sheds light on this conundrum. Politically, "2047" is no longer a distant marker. Instead, it seems to have already occurred. The fight for

democratic freedoms, guaranteed by Beijing for fifty years from 1997, is – after the passage of a Hong Kong national security law by Beijing (and without consultation of Hong Kongers) in June 2020 – imbued with a profound sense of hopelessness. Such political despair is magnified by the realities of living in one of the most expensive and unequal places on Earth, with youngsters in an unbalanced competition with a sizable and affluent expat population and a distant local elite. Culturally, this *is* a liminal moment for Hong Kongers – a time for choosing who they want to become as much as what traditions they can rely upon, whether an idealized version of Western liberties or some reengagement with the mainland.

We make no claim to be able to provide a definitive answer to any of these questions. Neither do we offer a protest event analysis, nor an assessment of the political opportunity structure of the 2019 protests. Our contribution is more modest. It consists in a new set of questions stemming from the displacements afforded by Hong Kong's colonial flag, which we empirically document here for the first time. These questions, we believe, could be fruitfully explored by future studies of contentious politics in Hong Kong and more generally.

References

Abrams B and P Gardner (eds.) (forthcoming) *Symbolic Objects in Contentious Politics*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Barthes R (1973) *Mythologies*. London: Hill and Wang.

Bellah RN (1967) Civil Religion in America. *Daedalus* 96(1). The MIT Press: 1–21.

Carroll J (2006) Colonial Hong Kong as a Cultural-Historical Place. *Modern Asian Studies* 40(2): 517-543.

Chan M (1996) Hong Kong: Colonial Legacy, Transformation, and Challenge. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 547, The Future of Hong Kong:11-23.

Dapiran A (2017) *City of Protest: A Recent History of Dissent in Hong Kong*. Victoria: Penguin Random House Australia.

Doerr N and Milman N (2014) Working with Images. In: della Porta D (ed.) *Methodological Practices in Social Movement Research*. Oxford University Press, pp. 418–445. DOI: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198719571.003.0017.

Dupré J-F (2020) Making Hong Kong Chinese: State Nationalism and its Blowbacks in a Recalcitrant City. *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 26(1): 8–26. DOI: 10.1080/13537113.2020.1716436.

Durkheim E (1995) *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. New York: Free Press.

Fan J (2019) Hong Kong's Protest Movement and the Fight for the City's Soul. *The New Yorker*, 7 December.

Gell A (1998) *Art and Agency*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Goodrum I (2019) HK protesters have their flags backward. *China Daily*, 13 August.

Hargreaves J (2000) *Freedom for Catalonia?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Holbig H (2020) Be Water, My Friend: Hong Kong's 2019 Anti-Extradition Protests. *International Journal of Sociology* 50(4): 325–337. DOI: 10.1080/00207659.2020.1802556.

Holland O (2019) Designed as a symbol of unity, Hong Kong's flag becomes the focus of protest. Available at: https://www.cnn.com/style/article/hong-kong-flag-design-protest/index.html (accessed 22 November 2021).

Hollingsworth J, Shelley J and Coren A (2019) How four deaths turned Hong Kong's protest movement dark. Available at: https://edition.cnn.com/2019/07/21/asia/hong-kong-deaths-suicide-dark-intl-hnk/index.html.

Jaskulowski K (2016) The magic of the national flag. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 39(4): 557–573. DOI: 10.1080/01419870.2015.1078482.

Kramm R (2020) Post-Imperial Permutations of the Hong Kong Protests. Available at: https://www.europenowjournal.org/2020/01/15/post-imperial-permutations-of-the-hong-kong-protests/ (accessed 22 November 2021).

Latour B (2005) *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lee W (2003) Students' concepts and attitudes toward citizenship: the case of Hong Kong. *International Journal of Educational Research* 39(6): 591-607.

Leung A and Cheung G (2009) June 4 is history, I speak for HK, says Tsang - then has to apologise. *South China Morning Post*, 15 May.

Lowe J and Yuk-Ha Tsang E (2018) Securing Hong Kong's identity in the colonial past: strategic essentialism and the umbrella movement. *Critical Asian Studies* 50(4): 556–571. DOI: 10.1080/14672715.2018.1503550.

Medway D et. al. (2019) Flags, society and space: Towards a research agenda for vexillgeography. *Area* 51:689–696.

Mead GH (2010) *Mead. A Reader*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Mische A (2009) Projects and Possibilities: Researching Futures in Action. *Sociological Forum* 24(3): 694–704. DOI: 10.1111/j.1573-7861.2009.01127.x.

Ortmann S (2015) The Umbrella Movement and Hong Kong's Protracted Democratization Process. *Asian Affairs* 46(1): 32–50. DOI: 10.1080/03068374.2014.994957.

Peirce CS (1955) *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*. New York: Dover Publications.

Purbrick M (2020) Hong Kong: The Torn City. *Asian Affairs* 51(3): 463–484. DOI: 10.1080/03068374.2020.1791528.

Roantree AM (2019) Flag-waving Grandma Wong gives Hong Kong protesters lesson in endurance. *Reuters*, 3 July.

Schatz RT and Lavine H (2007) Waving the Flag: National Symbolism, Social Identity, and Political Engagement. *Political Psychology* 28(3): 329–355. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-9221.2007.00571.x.

Sheridan M (2019) Why have Hong Kong demonstrators adopted an old British colonial flag? *The Spectator*, 2 July.

Shi N (2019) What Do the Flags at Hong Kong's Protests Mean? *The McGill International Review*. Available at: https://www.mironline.ca/what-do-the-flags-at-hong-kongs-protests-mean/ (accessed 22 November 2021).

South China Morning Post (2020) *China's Rebel City: The Hong Kong Protests*. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YgYuRGre6AA (accessed 22 November 2021).

Tiryakian E (2005) Durkheim, solidarity, and September 11. In: Alexander JC and Smith P (eds) *The Cambridge Companion to Durkheim*. Cambridge University Press.

Tiryakian E (1995) Collective Effervescence, Social Change and Charisma: Durkheim, Weber and 1989. *International Sociology* 10(3): 269–281. DOI: 10.1177/026858095010003002.

Wang Y (2019) Local identity in a global city: Hong Kong localist movement on social media. *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 36(5): 419–433. DOI: 10.1080/15295036.2019.1652837.

Zhao S (1998) A State-Led Nationalism: The Patriotic Education Campaign in Post-Tiananmen China. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 31(3): 287-302.