

Refereed article

Protest Geographies and Cross-Modal Icons in Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement

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Summary

In September 2014, thousands of people occupied the heart of Hong Kong's state and corporate power, the central business district. This paper provides a snapshot of the first days of the events that resulted in what would ultimately become a 79-day-long occupation, which eventually came to be known as the "Umbrella Movement." The paper first maps the protest geographies, focusing on the symbolism of place. It then proceeds to decipher the symbols employed by the protestors both in urban public and in digital space. The paper argues that the transformation of tangible everyday items like the umbrella into intangible digital icons demonstrates resilience in the face of state coercion in physical space. Acknowledging the symbolism of place and its inherent contestation, the paper, moreover, shows that the symbols that became cross-modal icons were those that were non-place-specific ones, and thus those shared by a wider collective. Finally, the article suggests it is important to reflect on the distribution of leadership across a wider collective and via different media forms. The data is drawn from participant observation on Hong Kong Island and Kowloon during the week of university class boycotts, from September 21–26, 2014, before the official start of Occupy Central — as well as from internet ethnography, newspaper analysis, and secondary literature research too.

Keywords: Public space, social media, social movements, symbols, Hong Kong, Occupy Central

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