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## Politics, Art and The Black Bauhinia Flag

Nikita Chung

*English, St. Joseph's College (Autonomous), Bengaluru, India (Student)*

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### ABSTRACT

The 2019 Extradition Bill of Hong Kong sparked a large number of protests in the city. As a result of which questions of Human Rights and the free status which Hong Kong has possessed since 1997 has come under question by many citizens. The Hong Kong Protests of 2019 shows us how art plays a major role in bringing attention to the problems being faced by Hong Kongers. Artists such as Y and group, Arto and Badiuca are among the most prominent who have contributed to the Protest Art. However, in addition to this, the protests have brought out the artists from the general masses as well. Their efforts debunk the previously held ideas of art as being only for the elite. Art today, especially through emerging platforms on the Internet has become easily accessible to the masses. However, it also shows us the diverse ways in which we can express apart from Digital Media as well. Art has been, a major source of bringing in the attention of individuals not only from Hong Kong, but from across the globe to the problems of governance faced by the individuals of Hong Kong. Art in the Hong Kong protests, ranges from graphic designed posters to paintings on walls, artwork on floors and even an evolving design of the flag. Rising political tension across the globe has resulted in emerging political artists such as those of Hong Kong. This paper, seeks to further explore the idea of art and art for the masses, protests, popular culture and politics all co-existing within the same space, through the Hong Kong protests.

Keywords: Art, Protest, Politics, Popular Culture, Governance

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### Introduction

It is safe to say that all Art in its own way is Political. However, Political Art as an art form seems to have existed in different ways in different countries for a long time now. Art is a

means of expression and therefore, it is not surprising that much of the art that has been repressed by those in power has been a means of curbing or silencing that expression. Most political art stems from critical approaches towards current state of affairs. In addition, most protests across the world have been aided with a number of artworks. The French Revolution, The Bolshevik Revolution, World War I and II are among a few which have influenced the scene of Art. We could also state that Art is in itself a means of protest commenting on political conditions. Today, we can see a rise in Political Art throughout the world, as a result of rising political tension across the countries. This paper, seeks to explore the Political Art that has emerged from The 2019 Extradition Bill in Hong Kong.

Hong Kong has had a long history of Protests. The 1989 Tiananmen Square Protests and the 2014 Hong Kong protests, more commonly known as the Umbrella Revolution have been some of the major protests which mark the history of Hong Kong. However, the recent Hong Kong protests, following the now on hold Extradition Bill of 2019, is one of the most intense and longest which Hong Kong has experienced. It is interesting to see the marked unity among the citizens of Hong Kong and how this has been expressed through Art and Popular Culture.

Hong Kong being highly influenced by the Western Media does not share the same ideologies of the Communist China which claims to have a right over the territory of Hong Kong. It was colonised by the British for more than 150 years since 1842. It was again leased to the United Kingdom by China for 99 years. Hong Kong was again claimed by China as the lease ended in 1997. However, due to a large amount of cultural influences in law and lifestyle from the West, a principle of “One country, two systems” was introduced. “This meant that while becoming part of one country with China, Hong Kong would enjoy “a high degree of autonomy, except in foreign and defence affairs” for 50 years. As a result, Hong Kong has its

own legal system and borders, and rights including freedom of assembly and free speech are protected.” (Cheung, et al. BBC News) However, this “autonomy” is granted only under the Basic Law which is the constitution under which Hong Kong enjoys this freedom from the Communist Chinese Government. This Basic Law expires in 2047, but is already being weakened under political pressure from China.

A number of individuals in Hong Kong, do not identify as native Chinese but more as ‘Hong Kongers’ due to years of mixed cultural influences. It has therefore been easier to spread information and more importantly, the art of the recent protests, due to the influence of Western media as well.

The need for the protests and therefore the protest art arose as a result of the Extradition Bill proposed earlier in 2019. This Bill stated that Anu criminals in Hong Kong could be detained and transferred to the country by which the individual is being charged. The Bill includes 37 crimes under which someone may be detained but does not include tax evaders. A number of critics, primarily those who are against the entire Bill, claim that this Bill could be used to suppress the voices of the Liberal and Political Activists by the Chinese Government as this Bill ensures that Hong Kong must detain and transfer individuals to the countries where they are being accused even if Hong Kong does not share any Extradition treaties with those countries. With the increasing power that China is gaining over the Hong Kong government, a number of Hong Kongers fear the consequences of the Extradition Bill and also fear the disappearance of their long enjoyed freedom of expression. However, Hong Kong claims that it would have the last say on the individuals getting extradited.

The need for this Bill was considered by the Chinese government, when a 19 year old Hong Kong man murdered his 20 year old pregnant girlfriend while vacationing in Taiwan in

February 2018. As Taiwanese officials pleaded Hong Kong to extradite the man, Hong Kong claimed that since it did not share any extradition treaty with Taiwan, it could not comply with Taiwan's request. While this seemed like something for which the Hong Kong citizens would not react, the incident of a Hong Kong book seller Lam Wing Kee of having been abducted and detained by the Chinese government on grounds of having books critical to the ways of the Chinese Government in 2015, sparked the tension among Hong Kongers. Hong Kongers believe that this would only make it easier for China to impose its style of governance which has long been under question by the liberals across the world, upon Hong Kong.

It has been rather challenging to typically point out and narrow down on the artists for study in this paper as there are many who have contributed to the protest through their art.

However, the most prominently covered through the media internationally and especially in India has been discovered, due to lack of access to a number of other sources of data. There have been some artists who have individually put forth their art, but there have also been many who have done it in groups of people, mostly as protesters against the Bill. It has also been challenging to locate specific artists behind the Art of the Hong Kong protests as many have chosen to remain anonymous and also have engaged in these artworks as group projects.

### **The Lennon Walls**

The Lennon Walls of Hong Kong are a true example of how Popular Culture and Politics co-exist through art. Different districts in Hong Kong have showcased post-its with pro-democracy slogans and other slogans of freedom. These Lennon Walls of Hong Kong, have been inspired from the Lennon Wall initially seen in Prague.

The original Lennon Wall in Central Prague, Czech Republic, was a result of the murder of the popular musician John Lennon who was a part of the reputed music group, The Beatles. It is located on the left of the Vltava River and south of the Charles Bridge. “Since the 1960s, the wall had been a location for romantic poems and anti-government messages.” (Hou, The Conversation.) It came to be known as the Lennon Wall in the 1980s and had lyrics inspired from songs by The Beatles. “In time, messages evoking Lennon’s common themes of peace, love and democracy covered the space. It became a location for community-generated protest art that endures - yet is ever-changing - today”. (Hou, The Conversation.)

The Lennon Walls has initially appeared during the 2014 Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong. The new Lennon Walls in Hong Kong have sprung up as result of the 2019 Extradition Bill and showcase a number of slogans and words of peace by pro-democracy protesters.



**Figure 1:** Sticky notes against the Extradition Bill. Photo by: Sam Tsang



**Figure 2:** Children and the Lennon Walls. Photo by: Sam Tsang



**Figure 3:** *Students Isaac Pang on the left and Samuel Chu have been managing the Lennon Walls in Wong Tai Sin and Tai Po respectively. Photo by: Jeffie Lam*

This act of Protest through Post-its has not been without set-backs. There have been multiple attempts by the police to take down the post-its. However, the protesters have consistently retaliated with increasing number of post-its every time an attempt was made to put them down. Police had taken down a number of post-its on the grounds of the post-its revealing personal details about the officers. While this may not be considered to be a peaceful act, on the side of the protesters, a certain frustration from their end can definitely be felt. However, the general nature of the protest through sticky notes has definitely brought in a lot of attention to the issue at hand from people in a peaceful and colourful way. However, one cannot help but point out the irony in the fact that such a colourful means has been employed to project and present a not-so-colourful political decision. Isaac Pang seen in Figure 3, is “an 18-year-old student at the University of Hong Kong’s SPACE community college, helped set up the Lennon Wall over the weekend, which had collected thousands of messages.

“Hongkongers have gone through a very difficult time over the past month. Several people have sacrificed their lives for the cause, and the government still refuses to address any of our demands no matter what we did,” he said, referring to suicide cases in recent weeks said to be linked to the extradition bill protests.” (Lam, et al. South China Morning Post.) This is only evidence of the struggle that is behind these colourful post-its. Samuel Chu states that “We are all frustrated. The ruling administration would have to step down in any other place if 2 million people thronged the streets”... “It might be a Post-it memo, but it is also a blessing to all Hongkongers.” (Lam, et al. South China Morning Post.) Miu Chow, a resident of the Tai Po area, states that, “Even if the walls are covered, it will not get in anyone’s way.” (Lam, et al. South China Morning Post.) In addition, a German expatriate living in the Tai Po area

itself, states that, “It is a peaceful and creative idea” making his second visit to the tunnels in Tai Po displaying post-its.

Through the pictures and the testimonies studied it was interesting to note how a number of young individuals have taken to the streets. In addition, as seen in Figure 2, we can see that children too are being educated about the condition and take an active part in it. This gives us a larger view on how Politics can affect each individual’s life at the grassroots.

While the Lennon Wall has been in attention ever since it began in Prague, the Hong Kong protests in 2014 and 2019, putting up what they term to be their version of the Lennon Walls, has definitely brought it under attention all across the world. Badiuca, a famous Chinese political cartoonist, now based in Australia has also brought much attention to the Lennon Walls by creating a flag reflective of the Lennon Walls in Hong Kong. Badiuca writes, “This flag is inspired directly by visual experience from the Lennon Wall in Hong Kong. It consists of 96 randomly allocated colour squares which (symbolise) the colour post-notes on the walls”... “Number 96 symbolises the year before the handover in 1997. Every colour on the flag is a different voice. And every individual voice deserves its place in Hong Kong.” (Chan, Hong Kong Free Press.) Badiuca has also played a major role in bringing attention to the nature of the Lennon Walls of Hong Kong. Badiuca’s flag not only speaks about the current evolution of the Lennon Walls in Hong Kong but it also reflects a piece of history of Hong Kong. He also states that the Lennon Walls combine “perfectly with street art, free speech and the resistance to communist tyranny.” (Chan, Hong Kong Free Press.) Badiuca comments on how through this flag he wished to inspire hopeful ideas, giving the flag’s colourful theme, and in addition comments how the Black Bauhinia Flag is a “courageous, rebellious and powerful icon’. (Chan, Hong Kong Free Press.) He further writes, “In my opinion, a successful political movement will need help from the powers of rebellion as well



as hope. A more colourful and delightful visual icon can accumulate hope much more effectively,”... “That is why the vibrantly coloured Lennon Wall Flag design can be a great supplement to the black flag. The simple beauty of it could win Hong Kong more support around the world.” (Chan, Hong Kong Free Press.)



**Figure 4:** *Badiucaio displays the Lennon Walls flag. Photo by: Badiucaio*

**Figure 5:** *A hoisting of Badiucaio’s Lennon Walls Flag. Photo by: Badiucaio*



We can therefore see, through the Lennon Walls of Hong Kong and the flag created by Badiucao in honour of the Lennon Walls of Hong Kong that art, popular culture and politics co-exist in the same sphere. The fact that artists draw on these connections, in fact help make art as powerful as it can be. While Badiucao is a professional artist, we see many protesters in the Hong Kong protests, who have consistently put up their political art and art of dissent to express their ideologies about the pro-democracy movement as well the government's stand on the 2019 Extradition Bill.

### **Digital Art**

Over the past few months, the protesters in Hong Kong have worked long and hard for their freedom from the dominant Communist Regime of China. They have come up with a number of ways in which they can put across the message to larger numbers of people and have therefore had long and rough days filled with protests and sleepless nights full of creativity and brain storming on what would be the best way of putting forth powerful messages.

A lot of the art produced is in the form of posters. These posters range from pop culture references to local cultural references. Nonetheless, most of these posters and illustrations are satirical and in many ways mock the state of Hong Kong.



**Figure 6:** *An illustration of Chief Executive Carrie Lam by 26-year old illustrator Elyse Leaf*

In the illustration seen in Figure 6, by a 26-year old illustrator Elyse Leaf, we can see an illustration of Carrie Lam, the Chief Executive of Hong Kong. There is a large group of Hong Kong pro-democracy protesters seen standing on top of her head, with many around her head as well. There is a poster seen hanging on her forehead, which translates to “Hong Kong add oil”. Her head seems to be mutilated in a number of ways, and we cannot help but notice the morbidity in this illustration. Leaf states that, “I have never felt such an indescribable rage towards one person in my life, and this person is Carrie Lam,” (Chow, BBC Culture.)

A similar sentiment has been shared by many other illustrators, which has fuelled their artwork. Professor Francis Lee, Director of the School of Journalism and Communication at The Chinese University of Hong Kong states, “This movement requires a great deal of creative power in order to sustain, and the emergence of artistic creativity during this process is natural. These creative outputs are embedded in the collective action and empowering the movement,” (Chow, BBC Culture.).

An anonymous artist known as Harcourt Romanticist alludes to the famous painting by Eugene Delacroix - 'Liberty Leading the People'. This painting depicts the black clad Hong Kong protesters in a state of unrest and waving the Black Bauhinia flag, which is symbolic of the 2019 Hong Kong protests. This piece of art is symbolic of the multicultural aspect of Hong Kong and the extent to which many other cultures as well intermingle there. In addition, this is also significant of the nature of the protests. Art, just as during the French and Russian Revolutions has become a weapon. The intent of the art, just as it was then, purely alludes to the nature of existence and the condition of the socio-political sphere of life. Him Lo, a protester and an artist states, "As an artist, I have different weapons if I want to voice out my messages, such as painting, poetry, or other kinds of media,"... "Some people might think these weapons are weak, but it is the message that we need to deliver to people. We have other options before resorting to violence." (Chow, BBC Culture.)



**Figure 7:** *Inspiration from Liberty Leading the People by Delacroix taken by Hong Kong artist Harcourt*

*Romanticist*



**Figure 8:** *The original Liberty Leading the People by Eugene Delacroix*

It has been noticed that most of the artists have chosen to remain anonymous. In doing this, as Kacey Wong, an artist, states that they create a new, fluid and united identity. Of having similar views and being united by these views. This makes their art quite effective and impactful.

There are a number of other illustrations and artworks by numerous artists, some of whom have remained anonymous, while others have not.



© Kacey Wong  
**Figure 9:** Kacey Wong's *The Shield*



**Figure 10:** Anonymous artist Phesti creates a parody of subway signs alluding to the human chain created by Hong Kong protesters.



**Figure 11:** A piece of artwork by Arto talking about two school children supporting the school strike alluding to Michelangelo's fresco painting 'The Creating of Adam'



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Navajyoti Aug 20



**Figure 12:** Graphic design by Arto encouraging people to join a general strike on Aug.5. The character 罷 meaning 'strike' is pronounced as "ba". The Chinese on this image reads as "ba la ba ba ba," a reference to a McDonald's jingle. The M is rotated 90 degrees to make a "3," meaning strikes in three sectors: school,



business and work.” (Caption and Image courtesy: TIME)

**Figure 13:** A Star Wars inspired poster to urge people to be a part of September 15th 2019 rally by the Civil Human Rights Fronts, which was banned by the Hong Kong police. (Image Courtesy: TIME)



**Figure 14:** “When reading upright, the two characters mean “conscience.” When tilted 90 degrees counter-clockwise, one character becomes “return” and the other becomes an icon of an eye. The image refers to the incident where a female protester was hit in the eye by a projectile on Aug. 11. Source: Telegram” (Caption and

*Image courtesy: TIME)*



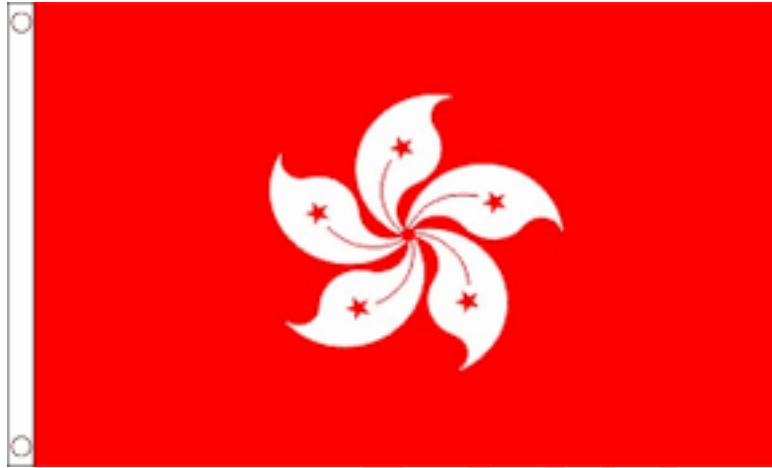
**Figure 15:** Artwork in the style of a Chinese calendar, urging students to boycott classes on 3rd of September, 2019. (Image courtesy: TIME)

The above shown artworks are among some of the many works of art which have been produced during the months of the Hong Kong protests in 2019. We can see how there have been cultural, political, pop cultural as well as historical references that have been made. It is important to comment here that art today and for a long time now, has made the impact upon people's minds because it has been relatable to the people. Art today, has transcended the ideology of being only for the upper class and is for all to access. In fact, the very basis of digital art and memes is upon this basis.

### The Black Bauhinia Flag

The flag of Hong Kong which was formally created only in 1997, after the British handover to the Chinese, has often been under serious speculation by many citizens of Hong Kong. In

fact, the 2019 Protests in Hong Kong was not the first time when an attempt was made to change or deface the flag. While the flag seems to be symbolic of a sense of democracy and an overall feel of what it is to be a Hong Konger, many have been critical of this.



**Figure 16:** *The original Hong Kong flag. (Image courtesy: mrflag)*

As seen in figure 16, the flag of Hong Kong is a red coloured flag with a Bauhinia flower in the centre with five stars located in each of the five petals of the flower. The red colour is symbolic of the Handover to the Chinese and the shade of red used in this flag is the same as that used on the Chinese flag as well. The stars on the five petals of the flower also allude to the stars on the Chinese flag. However, the curved nature of the petals is symbolic of the fluid and democratic nature of Hong Kong. “The petals on Hong Kong's flag are based on the pinkish-purple flower of the *Bauhinia blakeana* (or Hong Kong orchid tree). The tree was named after Sir Henry Blake, who served as the territory's governor from 1898 to 1903, and his wife, both of whom were keen botanists. Every known *Bauhinia blakeana* is believed to be a clone descended from the single, sterile specimen first discovered around 1880.” (Holland, CNN.)

The black Bauhinia flag has come to be symbolic of the 2019 Hong Kong Protests. In addition, some protesters even wave the British flag as a cry for the return of democracy to Hong Kong.



**Figure 17:** A protester with the Hong Kong Colonial flag draped on the podium of the Legislative Chamber  
(Image Courtesy: CNN Style)

The waving of the British flag or the Colonial flag is not symbolic of a wish for the return of a Colonial Era but instead for the return of democracy which was enjoyed during that period of time. During the 2019 protests, the protesters and artists had taken to changing and redesigning the Hong Kong flag into the Black Bauhinia flag as symbolic of their disregard for the powerful influence that China has upon the state of Hong Kong.

The Black Bauhinia Flag of the 2019 protests has undergone some modifications as well over time. For example, Y creates his own version of the Black Bauhinia flag as one which is bleeding. This is symbolic of the bloody nature of the protests as well as the idea of Hong

Kong bleeding. Of democracy dying. There have also been other versions where the Bauhinia flower is wilting, to symbolise the dying nature of Hong Kong. In addition, the very nature of the colour of the flag being turned black is in itself a symbol of darkness over powering Hong Kong.



**Figure 18:** A protester waving the British flag. (Image Courtesy: CNN Style)

**Figure 19:** A pro-democracy protester waves the Black Bauhinia flag (Image Courtesy: CNN Style)



**Figure 20:** “Flags at half-staff outside Hong Kong's Legislative Council the day after hundreds of pro-democracy protesters broke into chamber.” (Caption and Image Courtesy: CNN Style)





**Figure 21:** “Y created this image of a bloodstained black-and-white bauhinia after police used tear gas and rubber bullets to disperse protesters outside Hong Kong's Legislative Council on June 12.” (Caption and Image

*Courtesy: TIME)*

## Discussion

The Lennon Walls of Hong Kong, the illustrations and artworks by the protester and artists and the Black Bauhinia Flag all co-mingle to portray and express the protests and what the pro-democracy protesters stand for. There can, however, be different lenses through which these can be viewed. For instance, many view the changing of the Bauhinia flag as one of destruction and more importantly, illegal. However, many pro-democracy protesters state that this is a powerful means through which they can express themselves and really make an impact for what they stand for. There have been a large number of contributions by pro-Chinese artists as well. However, these pieces of art have not seemed to have made as large an impact in Hong Kong as well as the rest of the world, as much as the pro-democracy pieces of art have. However, it could also be speculated that media empires may have a role



to play in this, as the largest search engines and media companies are run by the West, even in Hong Kong. For instance, Google is one of the largest search engines used in Hong Kong. Therefore, the sharing of information may have a Western perspective or ideology naturally ingrained in the process.

In the artworks by the pro-democracy artists, it could be stated that the art is rather violent in nature in some cases and thus, cannot be truly considered a peaceful means of protest.

However, while there have been a number of views in this regard of whether or not the means of expression are legitimate or not, the pieces of artwork created are impactful and do create the sense of vigour and courage among the viewers. In addition, not only does it portray what the protesters stand for, but it also shows where they are coming from and the anxieties that have lead to this.

## **Conclusion**

The 2019 Hong Kong protests have made a strong mark, not only in Hong Kong but in the rest of the world as well. We must acknowledge that the artwork and illustrations, the Lennon Walls and the Black Bauhinia flag are among a few of the many aspects of the protest, which led to this powerful impact. Which brings one to the point of the effect of art overall. How far art goes to satire the society and in doing so, how far does it instruct what one should believe and what one should not. Art as a medium is very strong and one can fight wars with the powerful weapon that Art is. This has been heavily echoed in the 2019 Hong Kong protests.

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