

## Chapter 2

# Visual Struggle

This chapter initiates more deeply the discussion of the visibility of street-level visual struggles and their salience for the Hong Kong experience. It introduces several examples of how image bite, image event, and image politics are manifested in subaltern Hongkongers' counter-hegemonic resistance to the local and mainland regimes while vitally remaining part of the cultural and symbolic fabric of "one country, two systems."

Images in the Arab Spring acted as political weapons: People carried placards and recorded videos on their mobile phones to declare political demands and their presence (and actions) in public space was itself a visual political act. (Khatib 2012, p. 10)

If your pictures aren't good enough, you're not close enough. (Robert Capa)

### 2.1 Visual Struggle: Image Bites, Events, and Politics

Because Hong Kong's legislature, the Legislative Council (LegCo), and undemocratic political system have increasingly been seen as non-viable vectors for changing government policies or making the Hong Kong government more accountable or responsive to the public, protests against the local and Chinese governments have become the most dominant and visible mode of political discourse and resistance in the community (Garrett and Ho 2014). An indicator of frustration and lack of faith in this "real but unfair" competitive authoritarian political system (Levitsky and Way 2010) is that the LegCo itself has become a field of visualized direct action dramas where radical pro-democracy legislators routinely perform a contentious repertoire ranging from throwing objects at regime officials during speeches, waving banners and effigies, and other postmodern "culture jamming" (Dery 1993) and "political jamming" (Cammaerts 2007) tactics. Even the images of the forcible expelling of these democratic radical legislators by the hegemonic forces—broadcast live to Hong Kong over the traditional and new and social media—invokes the image event of a less than inclusive democratic regime. These essentially constitute "image bite" politics where "audiovisual segments in which candidates [or

legislators or protesters] are shown but not necessarily heard” as a form of political communication (Grabe and Bucy 2009, p. 53). These types of visual tactics, while typically dismissed or underappreciated by classical social movement scholars or political scientists, are emblematic of how social movements and activists in Hong Kong have become representative of postmodern and new social movements. These movements commonly use visual displays and outrageous performances as operative strategies to challenge hegemony in what is called *image events*: “staged protests designed for media dissemination” (Delicath and DeLuca 2003, p. 315).

Yet, they are not just for media consumption or dissemination. They are a major element of movement mobilization and visual resistance. Hong Kong is one of the world’s most advanced cities in information communication technologies (ICT) and has some of the highest degrees of broadband and smartphone penetrations. These resources are readily used by the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region’s (HK-SAR’s) subalterns to carry out their visual struggles. Protesters, civil society organizations, and political parties all use smartphones and digital cameras to photograph and make videos of processions, speeches, police confrontations, etc. In fact, the recording, uploading, and online dissemination of Hong Kong’s major and minor protests have approached ubiquity. Almost everybody records everybody—and themselves, i.e., “selfies”—it seems. Many of these images and videos are passed over Facebook and other new and social media and become part of the social media mashup uprising mentioned in the previous chapter (Figs. 2.1 and 2.2). In turn, many of these images—like those broadcasted from the LegCo—become creative fodder



Fig. 2.1 Members from online activists “Keyboard Frontline” in the 2013 July 1st procession



Fig. 2.2 Members from online group “Comic Daemons” march in the 2013 July 1st procession

for Hong Kong’s very active political mashup culture where they circulate online and manifest themselves in banners, placards, and T-shirts of embodied activists marching in the streets. Subsequently, these protester-generated images become additional visual weapons of counter-visuality to dispute hegemonic representations of the activists, confrontations, and political and social problems.

## 2.2 Targets of Visual Struggle

The LegCo and the HKSAR government headquarters and principal officials are favored targets<sup>1</sup> for image events and image bite politics. In 2010, for example, more than 10,000 students literally surrounded and “visually occupied” the legislature

<sup>1</sup> China’s Liaison Office in Hong Kong is another favorite target of counter-hegemonic protests. Though street actions targeting the Liaison Office have increased in incidence and degrees of confrontation since 2010, it still stands behind the SAR government and Legislative Council destinations. However, this is a situation that could quickly change in the next year as confrontations with the central authorities over Hong Kong’s political reform intensify. Regardless, the lower popularity of the LO as a protest target should not be interpreted as of less saliency. Indeed, contentious performances at the LO carry higher symbolic weight than those directed at the LegCo or HKSAR offices. Though beyond the scope of this limited work a number of practical issues conflate to deter or degraded the efficacy of street actions against the LO such as its remote location on Hong Kong Island in the Western District, distance from the public subway, and more limited area and tightly

over special administrative region (SAR) government plans to push through a budget for controversial infrastructure program desired by mainland authorities. Known as the “Siege of the LegCo,” this action most vividly and visually marks the turning point in HKSAR protest culture where Hongkonger subalterns began to earnestly and subversively “fight back” against hegemonic rule and its visual aesthetic of an apolitical, apathetic Hong Kong. Photographs and videos of the siege and of harried legislators being “rescued” and “escorted” by the Hong Kong police while thousands jeered at the power elite shocked SAR and mainland officials and visually disrupted hegemonic constructions of “Nothing to see in Hong Kong. All is well.” Hong Kong’s chief executive and other leading officials are also often targeted at public events, including ostensibly non-political occasions such as Hong Kong’s Lunar New Year fair.

Since 2010, visual siege tactics and occupations remain a popular and powerful image weapon. In 2012, for instance, the exterior area of the Hong Kong SAR government headquarters was occupied for 10 days over government plans to mandate Moral and National Education (MNE) for primary and secondary students. Concerned about communist “brainwashing,” anti-MNE rallies of more than 90,000 and 120,000 Hongkongers supported the student and civil society occupiers with their demonstrations of solidarity. Some called the event “Occupy Tamar” (Lau et al. 2012; Lo 2012) and others referred to it as “Tamar Square”—implicitly invoking the specters and spectacles of both Egypt’s “Tahrir Square” in 2011 from the Arab Spring, the spontaneous non-violent massive public gatherings from the color revolutions in the 1990s and early 2000s, and the more salient examples for Hongkongers of China’s Tiananmen Square in 1989 and Victoria Park in 2003. As will be discussed and illustrated elsewhere, after nearly a quarter of a century, Hong Kong continues to be the site of the largest and most important June 4th memorials in the world with a record attendances of 180,000 in 2012 (Lai 2012) or more in 2014 (SCMP Staff Reporters 2014). Not simply a 1-day protest affair, the weeks leading up to and following June 4th are typically filled with smaller protest events and political meetings, June 4th education camps, memorial marches and runs, and other visual displays of solidarity, remembrance, and resistance. Hong Kong’s schools, universities, and public spaces similarly become venues of visual struggle to remember and demand justice. Beginning in 2013, splits within Hong Kong’s subaltern pro-democracy forces have led to the hosting of alternative June 4th observations in *Tsimshatsui* hosted by more defiant, locally oriented, and staunchly anti-communist radical pro-democracy forces. Though not matching the strength of the orthodox June 4th memorial—just between 3000 and 7000 supporters in 2014 (SCMP Staff Reporters 2014)—their visual repertoire is significantly more transgressive insofar as challenging the hegemonic forces in Beijing. Pro-government counter-protesters have also taken to visual weapons in attempting to dispute the June 4th massacre with public video screenings immediately outside Victoria Park during this year’s candlelight vigil.

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controlled public spaces for hosting protests of any substantial size. See Chap. 5 for a limited discussion on other constraints.

The government has not been the only target of Hongkonger occupation actions. Following the global Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement in 2011, Hong Kong's "Occupy Hong Kong" or "Occupy Central" as it was variously called was launched in the heart of the city's financial district. While generally considered ineffective, the Occupy Hong Kong camp located underneath the iconic Hong Kong Shanghai Bank of China building was one of the longest lasting occupations in the global movement and was highly visible in Hong Kong due to its prominent location in the Central business district (Garrett 2013a). Though not related to the global anti-capitalism associated with OWS, an "Occupy Central with Love and Peace" (OCLP) non-violent civil disobedience movement has emerged locally in 2013 threatening to deploy 10,000 supporters in the summer of 2014 occupying the streets of the central business district if the SAR government refuses to provide sincere consultations on "real," i.e., authentic, universal suffrage. Many of OCLP's deliberation days and information events have been transformed into visual political spectacles as local pro-regime forces have attempted to disrupt and discredit the movement. Following a year of anti-OCLP propaganda by Chinese and SAR officials aimed at intimidating residents from participating, warnings of other possible occupation actions outside of OCLP have emerged such as those announced in June 2014 by Hong Kong's Federation of Students (Cheung and Lam 2014).

In other high-profile occupations in 2013, Asia's richest man, Hong Kong tycoon Li Ka-shing, also known as "Superman," had the front of his Cheung Kong Center located in the Central business district occupied for more than a month by striking dockworkers, and civil society and pro-democracy supporters. In the past the site had been the target of days-long protests over "property hegemony" but none matched the weeks-long occupation of public area in front of the Center. Significantly, immediately after the protesters dispersed, several large planters were placed in the areas where the occupation and protests had been stayed. This was seen by protesters as an attempt to deny any future occupations. A similar strategy of blocking off public spaces with planters to preclude or diminish the area for protests was carried out by Chinese authorities years earlier when they installed large flowerbeds to keep religious dissidents from camping out in front of the Liaison Office. The struggle over public spaces and the right to be visible in their protests and political speech has occurred in other locations in Hong Kong as will be briefly discussed later.

In mid-October 2013, the SAR government was once again under large-scale siege by occupiers and multiple of assemblages of more than 100,000 Hongkongers concerned over the authorities' denial of a free-to-air television license for Hong Kong Television (HKTV). Widely seen as a political move by the government favoring mainland-friendly television stations, the protests and occupation were framed by the protesters and subaltern media as a fight to "defend Hong Kong's 'core values'" (South China Morning Post 2013; Chow et al. 2013). Visually one could read this in the embodiments of the protesters. Several protesters, for instance, wore T-shirts bearing the declaration: "Resist or Die" (Fig. 2.3). Elsewhere, a large black placard with white writing was attached to the walls adjacent to the entrance to the SAR government complex declared how protesters perceived the





**Fig. 2.3** Two Hong Kong TV supporters embodying defiant message to the HKSAR government during the October 20 protest procession, 2013

SAR government's action had endangered Hong Kong society. It also gave a warning that has become more and more pervasive in some sectors of Hong Kong's protest sphere: "China, Leave Hong Kong alone. Hongkongers are not Chinese." The message and location were no accidents. Since the opening of the government headquarters at Tamar, thus "disappearing" (Abbas 1997) one of the last vestiges of the colonial occupation, this section of the wall has become a de facto billboard for visual dissent during protests and occupations at Tamar (Figs. 2.4, 2.5 and 2.6).

### 2.3 Spreading Conflagrations of Counter-Visuality

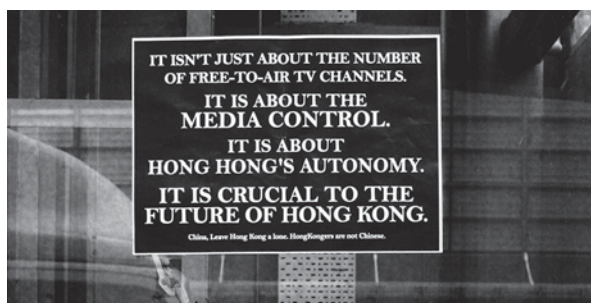
Though this monograph focuses primarily on the core protest routes and venues on Hong Kong Island that have traditionally constituted the city's protest culture, other locations on the Kowloon side and in the New Territories have also served as sites of counter-visuality in Hongkongers' struggle for social and political justice. Notably, the visibility of some of these venues has risen significantly in recent years as political and social tensions in the SAR have increased. Hong Kong–Mainland tensions have grown steadily under the relentless weight of tens and hundreds of millions of mainland tourists overwhelming the city since Chinese authorities liberalized mainland tourism schemes in 2003 to aid an economically laggard and depressed HKSAR economy recovering from the twin calamities of the Asian Financial Crisis and severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) epidemic. As Hong Kong–Mainland relations continued to erode drastically since 2012 (Garrett 2013b), and as the local struggle between the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forces intensified dramatically and spread to broader society, these once marginal sites of visual struggle beyond Hong Kong Island have gained and continue to accrue greater prominence and salience.

Since 2013, two of these areas—the Mongkok Pedestrian Area (Zone) and the Canton Road–Hong Kong Cultural Centre–Star Ferry corridor—have become

**Fig. 2.4** “Hong Kong is not China” resistance sign attached to the wall adjacent the entrance to the HKSAR government headquarters during the HKTV demonstrations, October 2013



**Fig. 2.5** Close-up of “Hong Kong is not China” sign outside the HKSAR government headquarters



the locus of high-profile rows and transgressive symbolic politics of visible resistance against local and central ruling forces. Several early-2014 street protests targeting affluent mainland tourists and those violating local social norms (e.g., public defecation and urination) transpired along Canton Road and in the Mongkok

**Fig. 2.6** “Hong Kong is for HKger” sign from the HKTV protest march on October 20, 2013



Pedestrian Area. These acts subsequently provoked angry denunciations, political interventions, and threats of economic violence by China's top leaders in addition to becoming an international media spectacle. Intermeshed within these protests were elements of incipient Hong Kong autonomy, independence, and separatist elements who also frequently brandish visual icons and symbols repugnant to China's communist leaders and nationalists: namely colonial-era and the Dragon and Lion flags, banners, and placards.

The Hong Kong Cultural Centre and Mongkok areas have also gradually become unwilling protest vortexes of entangling tussles between local hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forces. For instance, the harbor-side space surrounding the Cultural Centre is now the location of an alternative June 4th political ritual which, in contrast to the traditional Victoria Park Candlelight vigil, is focused on bringing democracy to Hong Kong rather than China and is aggressively and vehemently anti-communist. This is a disposition manifested visually in scores of iconic anti-communist banners and T-shirts provocatively declaring “We Dare to Fight!”. Canton Road, connecting to the Hong Kong Cultural Centre and Star Ferry, was also the protest venue for the highly controversial “anti-locust” protests which have spurred a series of other similar transgressive actions. Mongkok, beyond the 2014 Patriotic Parody procession where “Red Guard”- and “Cultural Revolution”-attired nativist Hongkongers paraded through the bustling shopping Mecca yelling at mainland tourists to be patriotic and go home and to buy only Chinese, not Hong Kong goods, was also the 2013 site of one of Hong Kong's largest major confrontations between pro-democracy groups and pro-government “civil society” groups.

In what has come to be known as the “WTF”<sup>2</sup> clashes at Mongkok, on one side were pro-democracy supporters of a primary school teacher who had chided Hong Kong Police officers for failing to protect local religious dissidents being accosted by a pro-government “civil society” group. On the other side, pro-government and pro-police supporters railed against the exasperated teacher's use of profanity at the police officers. Potently, both sides had been thrown together in close proximity on

<sup>2</sup> Refers to the profane slang for expressing exasperation, “What the Fuck?”



a hot August afternoon in a narrow, suffocating shopping ravine of the Mongkok Pedestrian area. The area is already normally a highly congested space on weekends, literally shoulder-to-shoulder, even without hundreds of protesters and counter-protesters.

Not unexpectedly, physical clashes emerged. Several of pro-regime members allegedly assaulted and harangued journalists and the teacher's supporters creating a situation which nearly devolved into chaos beyond the police's control. Adding further visual drama to an already chaotic scene out of the Cultural Revolution were the waving pennant wars of Chinese national flags flaunted by pro-Beijing groups, and Taiwanese, Tibetan, and Hong Kong autonomy and colonial flags wielded by supporters of the teacher, various pro-democracy elements and pro-Hongkonger groups. Shortly after the borderline pro-regime violence at Mongkok in August 2013, another confrontation took place in the New Territories in the new town of *Tin Shui Wai*. There, in front of journalists and Hong Kong police, government-friendly alleged triads brazenly attacked pro-democracy protesters picketing against the SAR's chief executive. These successive clashes—one weekend after another—conjured public fears of a SAR at the brink of turmoil.

Another New Territories town, *Sheung Shui*, has been the site of repeated demonstrations between 2012 and 2013 by Hongkongers upset with mainland “parallel traders” coming across the Hong Kong–China boundary. Groups like the North District Parallel Imports Concern Group educated other Hongkongers and mobilized resistance through a combination of street actions and online activism that ultimately gave birth to the “Reclaim Sheung Shui” campaign in September 2012. After one protest where local autonomy and independence groups waved colonial flags and shouted and waved placards for mainland traders to get out, a former top official at the State Council's Hong Kong and Macao Affairs Office basically told disaffected Hongkongers to “love China” or “get out” (Cheung and Lau 2012). More recently, a number of protests against the HKSAR government's plans to develop the Northeastern New Territories (NENT) have led to a number of physical confrontations between demonstrators and Hong Kong authorities albeit mostly on Hong Kong Island (thus far); namely, these actions were the May 4th “anti-white elephant” protest against the high-speed rail and Northeast Development projects, and the June 6th Northeast activist storming of the Legislative Council also over government plans to build new towns in the Territories.

As introduced in Chap. 1, visual evidence of social movements and protests constitute valuable empirical data sources for examining collective memories, contentious performances and politics, identity, political icons, social interaction, and visual symbolism in hegemonic struggles (Doerr et al. 2013; Edelman 2001; Liao 2010; Philipps 2012; Zuev 2010). The next section presents short photo essays depicting the visibility of three major occupation and protest productions that occurred in 2012 and 2013 that were introduced in this chapter. It also presents four cases of emerging protests taking place or involving sites outside the main protest center of Hong Kong Island. The chapter following this section introduces how the urban fabric of the city of Hong Kong facilitates dissent and enables the visibility and counter-hegemonic visibility of its subaltern counter-public (Fraser 1990).

## 2.4 Photo Essays

### 2.4.1 *Anti-MNE and Occupation of HKSAR Government Headquarters, September 2012 (Figs. 2.7, 2.8, 2.9, 2.10, 2.11, 2.12, 2.13, 2.14, 2.15, 2.16, 2.17, 2.18, 2.19, 2.20, 2.21, 2.22, 2.23, 2.24, 2.25, 2.26, 2.27, 2.28, 2.29, 2.30, 2.31, 2.32 and 2.33)*



**Fig. 2.7** Parent photographing child standing next to an effigy of the student activists displaying iconic anti-MNE gesture during occupation of the HKSAR government headquarters at Tamar

Counter-hegemonic Resistance in China's Hong Kong  
Visualizing Protest in the City

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2015, IX, 396 p. 530 illus., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-981-287-235-7