

Understanding the identities of Hong Kong people through transgressive signs

Part III

Constructing, Negotiating and Contesting Identities

6

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Introduction

A small city in South-East Asia, Hong Kong has made the headlines in international news in recent years when hundreds of thousands of people expressed their views on political and social matters time and time again through territory-wide protests. Ever since the change of sovereignty from Britain to China more than two decades ago, Hong Kong has experienced substantial social and political changes, which challenge, transform and cement the identities of its citizens.

Despite that Hong Kong has long been a hotspot for linguistic landscape research, little scholarly work has specifically focused on the relationship between the linguistic landscape of the city and the identities of its people. Like many studies in the field in general, previous attempts at understanding the use of language and/or other semiotic resources on signs in the territory have tended to be based on institutional or commercial signs, that is, conventional signs that are in the right place, produced and permitted by the authority concerned. Signs which are more unorthodox or even occasionally subversive in nature, by contrast, have largely been overlooked in a city where such items were rarely found in the past. However, the increasingly common large-scale social and political events and activities in various forms and settings taking place in Hong Kong in recent years have afforded a unique opportunity to examine how its people collectively voice their stances and in turn express their identities through unsanctioned banners, posters, sticky notes and other artefacts in lived experiences in the cityscape. Such unexpected and unauthorised signs, which can be subsumed under Scollon and Scollon's (2003) category of transgressive signs, provide an intriguing window into the ways in which identity, lived experience and linguistic landscape interact.

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Focusing on the relationship between identity and transgressive signs through careful choices of semiotic resources and strategies, the current research presents three case studies of transgressive signs associated with some of the most significant social and political events in recent years in Hong Kong, in order to investigate the identity construction, representation and development of a particular group with similar political and social orientations over time.

Contextualisation

Historical background: from a colony to a special administrative region

From its humble beginnings as a small fishing village, Hong Kong has evolved over the last century as an important international city. Following two Opium Wars in the middle of the 19th century, Hong Kong became a colony of the British Empire in stages, with the complete colonisation of the territory in 1898 through a 99-year lease of the bulk of Hong Kong's land. For most of the 20th century where Hong Kong was under British rule, the territory attracted immigrants from Mainland China and foreign investment, resulting in a rapidly expanding population and substantial economic development. By the end of the 20th century, Hong Kong had transformed from a manufacturing-based economy to a service-based economy and firmly established itself as one of the most significant financial centres and trading and logistics hubs in the world.

In 1997, Hong Kong experienced the transfer of sovereignty from the United Kingdom (UK) to the People's Republic of China (PRC). Commonly known as the handover of Hong Kong, the historical event marked the turn of the city from a colony to a special administrative region. Under the 'one country, two systems' principle, Hong Kong was guaranteed autonomy for a period of 50 years, except in defence and foreign affairs. Hong Kong's mini-constitution, the Basic Law, stipulates the maintenance of the capitalist economic system and the common law system. It also ensures the protection of people's rights and freedoms based on the rule of law

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and a judiciary independent from the legislative and executive branches of the government (Hong Kong Government, 2019a). The city's law-making body, known locally as the Legislative Council, comprises 70 members, half of whom are elected directly by geographical constituencies while the other half are indirectly elected by functional constituencies consisting of professional or special interest groups. The executive and administrative system of the government, headed by the leader of the city called the Chief Executive, is composed of 13 policy bureaux and 56 departments. Elected by a highly selective election committee and appointed by the Central Government of the PRC, the Chief Executive is advised by the Executive Council, the local government's cabinet, consisting of 32 appointed members.

Language situation

With a population of 7.5 million people (Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department, 2019) in a total land area of 1106 square km (Hong Kong Lands Department, 2019), Hong Kong is one of the world's most densely populated urban areas. According to the latest official statistics collected in 2016 (Hong Kong Government, 2019b), an overwhelming majority of the population are Cantonese speakers (88.9%), followed by small proportions of English speakers (4.3%), speakers of other Chinese dialects (3.1%), Putonghua speakers (1.9%) and speakers of other languages such as Filipino and Indonesian (1.9%). As a variety of Chinese originating from Southeast China, Cantonese is the mother tongue of most residents of Hong Kong. Putonghua, by contrast, refers to the official spoken language of the PRC with its origins in Northern China. Sometimes used interchangeably with the term 'Mandarin', Putonghua is an umbrella term covering a group of related varieties of Chinese spoken widely in Mainland China. Cantonese and Putonghua are often considered mutually unintelligible, with notable differences in such aspects as pronunciation, syntax and lexis.

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Apart from the difference in speech, Hong Kong can also be distinguished from other parts of Mainland China by writing. The traditional Chinese character set, with its long history of use and stable forms traced back to centuries earlier, is dominant in Hong Kong. The simplified Chinese character set, which was introduced in the 1950s by the PRC government to promote literacy, is in use in Mainland China. Compared with traditional characters, simplified characters generally consist of simpler forms and fewer strokes. As such, it is arguably easier and faster to write in simplified characters, though the two character sets also share a number of characters that are identical in form. In the last two decades, written Cantonese has increasingly been used in Hong Kong in addition to Standard written Chinese, not only in informal communication but also in the mass media. With its distinct vocabulary, extra Chinese characters and occasional inclusion of English words, written Cantonese reflects strongly the local culture and is hardly comprehensible to people outside Hong Kong.

Since the colonial period, Chinese and English have been the official languages of Hong Kong and have remained so after the handover. The sociolinguistic profile in colonial Hong Kong was generally described as biliterate (Standard written Chinese in the traditional Chinese script and English) and bilingual (Cantonese and English). The change of sovereignty has seen the introduction of a language education policy by the Hong Kong government to promote biliteracy and trilingualism in the city ([Hong Kong Education Bureau, 2014](#)), with the aim of nurturing students to become proficient in Standard written Chinese and English as before, and to speak fluent Cantonese, English as well as Putonghua. In this connection, Putonghua as an individual language subject has become part of the curriculum in primary and secondary schools, and its use as a medium of instruction for teaching the Chinese language subject has been encouraged by the government through the provision of extra resources. While traditional characters are taught almost exclusively in schools and used predominantly for official purposes in Hong Kong, simplified characters can also be found in the city on both institutional and commercial signs and in informal or examination settings to speed up writing.

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Social and political development after the handover

Once described as “politically apathetic” ([Degolyer & Scott, 1996](#)), Hong Kong people in fact have for decades participated in social and political events. Large-scale public protests in the city date back to as early as the 1960s, when a hunger strike protesting against the increase in ferry fare turned into a four-day riot. While protests before the handover were sporadic, especially after the 1980s, the June Fourth Incident in Tiananmen Square in Beijing in 1989 prompted 1.5 million people in Hong Kong to take to the streets, marking the largest demonstration before the handover. In the last two decades since the change of sovereignty, protests have increased both in size and in number ([South China Morning Post, 2019](#)). More than 50,000 protests of different sizes concerning varying issues have been staged since the handover, making Hong Kong a “city of protests” ([Garrett, 2014](#), p. v). Social and political issues which have led to massive public order events include the proposed legislation of a national anti-subversion bill in 2003, the demolition of a historic ferry pier and the redevelopment and gentrification of a traditional neighbourhood in 2007, the construction of a terminal for express trains directly linking Hong Kong to parts of Mainland China in 2010, and the introduction of national education to all schools in 2012. Every year since 2003, rallies have been held on July 1, the anniversary date of the handover, to express social discontent, dissatisfaction with the government and other political causes, notably the cry for more democracy.

The demand for the upholding of existing freedoms and greater democracy culminated in two citywide social movements in 2014 and 2019. In August 2014, the central government of the PRC proposed a framework for the 2017 Chief Executive Election, which was supposed to be the first to take place with universal suffrage according to a prior decision made by Beijing in 2007. According to the proposed framework, only two or three candidates approved in advance by a 1200-member nominating committee would be eligible to run in a general one-person-one-vote election. This proposal to pre-screen the candidates for the 2017 Chief Executive Election was perceived by many in Hong Kong as a move which reneged on Beijing’s original promise and in

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effect denied an open election and stifled universal suffrage. Branded by the pro-democracy supporters as ‘fake’ universal suffrage, the ruling provoked public outcry in Hong Kong, resulting in a series of protests demanding ‘genuine’ universal suffrage. Lasting for 79 days in 2014, the mass sit-ins and occupation of a number of key business districts across the territory on an unprecedented scale have come to be known as the Umbrella Movement. Having initially emerged as a civil disobedience campaign called Occupy Central involving sit-ins to blockade only the Central Business District of the city, the series of street protests soon grew into a full-blown movement in response to Beijing’s decision. During the occupation of major thoroughfares across the city, tear gas and pepper spray were used on protesters who shielded themselves with umbrellas, hence giving the Movement its name. With the clearance of crowds in protest sites and the arrest of campaign organisers and student leaders after months of stalemate, however, the Movement eventually lost momentum, and the hope of universal suffrage was left unfulfilled. Five years later in 2019, Hong Kong again saw public uproar caused by the local government’s proposal to amend an extradition bill that would allow the transfer of fugitives from the city to jurisdictions without a pre-existing extradition agreement, including Mainland China. The government’s controversial move provoked considerable anxiety and fear of arbitrary extraditions for political prosecutions or for crimes committed unintentionally, despite the initial official claim that the amendments were meant to resolve a murder case in Taiwan involving a suspect from Hong Kong. Following a series of protests against the bill, two of which were estimated to attract record numbers of one to two million protestors respectively by the organisers, the government announced the suspension of the bill. Without the promise of a full withdrawal, however, protests continued and escalated into weekly marches and rallies across the territory, clashes between the protestors and the police, the breaking into the Legislative Council, the city’s biggest general strike, and sit-ins at the airport that resulted in partial shutdowns. At the time of this study, the city was embroiled in months of conflicts surrounding the extradition bill with no sign of an end to the standoff. Further demands made by the protestors, including an independent enquiry into police misconduct and the

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implementation of universal suffrage for the Legislative Council and Chief Executive Elections, remain unaddressed by the government.

The identities of Hong Kong people

The historical, linguistic, social and political contexts of Hong Kong, with China playing a significant role, are inextricably linked with the identities of its people. In this regard, some common labels of identity which have been used often involve the (non-)affiliation or (dis-)alignment with China. These labels include *Hong Kong citizen*, *Chinese citizen*, *Hong Kong Chinese citizen* and *Chinese Hong Kong citizen*. Since the year of the handover, a long-standing public opinion programme has been conducting surveys on this issue of ethnic identity in Hong Kong for more than two decades ([HKUPOP, 2019](#)). Generally considered to be one of the most representative surveys on the issue of identity of Hong Kong people and widely quoted in the local press since its inception, the survey conducted by the programme is the only one available which traces the diachronic change on this subject. According to its most recent tracking survey in June 2019 in the wake of two anti-extradition bill demonstrations with record turnouts, more than half (53%) of the 1015 respondents have chosen the label ‘Hong Kong citizen’ to identify themselves, followed by just less than a quarter (23%) opting for the label ‘Chinese Hong Kong citizen’. In other words, more than three-quarters (76%) of the respondents identify themselves as Hong Kong people in general. Indeed, the strength of the ‘Hongkonger’ identity has reached an all-time record high in this survey ([HKUPOP, 2019](#)). At the same time, the strength of the ‘Chinese’ identity has hit a record low since 2007, with only approximately one-tenth (11%) of the respondents identifying themselves as Chinese. This apparent dichotomy in ethnic identity between Hongkonger and Chinese is particularly prominent in younger age groups, as indicated by the survey result that a vast majority (90%) of those aged 18–29 were not proud of being a national citizen of China, compared with a lower percentage (71%) for respondents of all ages

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(Hong Kong Free Press, 2019). These opposing trends thus seem to suggest that the two identities are in conflict with each other, and reflect how social and political events shape Hong Kong people's recognition and definition of their identity.

Literature review

Since the emergence of the field around two decades ago, linguistic or semiotic landscape research has long had a strong focus on authorised signs, produced and permitted by the authority concerned, be it a government organisation or a business company, with a comparatively clear agency or beneficiary in terms of whose interests are being served. While these studies have provided rich insights into the linguistic or semiotic resources employed in signs that are made by the right people and put in the right place by those with the right to do so, what has been relatively out of the spotlight and has yet to be fully understood is the phenomenon of transgressive signs in the landscape. According to Scollon and Scollon (2003, p. 146), a transgressive sign is one that is out of place and is “in some way unauthorized – graffiti, trash, or discarded items are the most common examples”. In this respect, it is useful to distinguish signs which are deliberately transgressive with those which are only accidentally transgressive. The former type involves signs which are placed voluntarily and intentionally by some agent in the landscape against conventional expectation and without authorisation. Graffiti, for instance, is an obvious example of such transgressive signs for many municipal authorities. Notices advertising properties for sale, consumer products or private services posted on walls, utility boxes and lampposts in public and private places without permission are also typical examples. The emplacement of these deliberately transgressive signs, as such, is the result of social actions by volition. The latter type, by contrast, involves signs which only happen to be misfits in the landscape either through natural forces or human lack of care. An overhanging advertising billboard which has fallen onto the ground because of either a hurricane or a loose screw is an example of a sign which only has become transgressive inadvertently, so is a

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discarded price tag of a purchase lying on a pavement. In such cases, the physical transfer of a sign from its rightful place to somewhere it does not belong is based on some kind of randomness. The misplacement of these unintentionally transgressive signs, as such, is not triggered by any calculated social actions. This distinction between transgressive signs by volition and by accident is particularly relevant to the present discussion, as the construction and representation of identity of the agent creating the transgressive sign concerns the first but not the second type.

Although modest in number in landscape research, previous studies of transgressive signs by volition have already pointed to some interesting associations between such signs and identity. Graffiti, for example, have been argued to indicate “the spatial identity of groups, or territoriality, turf hostilities, and other sorts of intergroup – racial or class – tensions” (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2010, p. 21). In his study of graffiti in Melbourne following a series of studies on hip-hop, Pennycook (2010) focused on the large unsanctioned pictures and texts on walls in public space in the form of stencil art produced by hip-hop communities. He posited that such hip-hop graffiti are intended only for members of the subculture and are unintelligible to outsiders. Specifically, graffiti styles and locations reflect one’s spatial, class and ethnic identity within the subculture. They thus serve a gate-keeping function for the identity concerned. Moving from the musical scene to the political arena, the intentional use of transgressive signs has increasingly been examined in social movements in recent years (for example, Chun, 2014; Martín Rojo, 2014), where protest signs are part of the discourse of dissent. These signs are not only transgressive in nature in the sense that they are out of place because they are part of an unauthorised social or political event; they are also often subversive as they express anti-government messages which promote reform or even revolt against a regime. In their analysis of protest signs from the Arab Spring Revolution and the Jasmine Revolution, Said and Kasanga (2016) focused on the use of semiotic resources by protesters to produce artefacts which communicated to the relevant authorities and/or the larger audience. Unlike hip-hop graffiti which restrict the communication of identity to only in-group members as observed in

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Pennycook (2010), protest signs in Said and Kasanga (2016) encourage the communication of the identity of protestors to other communities. In particular, three frames of interpretation were identified in their analysis, highlighting the protestors' identities as patriotic nationals, as supporters of freedom and as powerful agents in political development. Shifting the emphasis from the signs in protests per se to the appropriation of such signs by other institutions, Waksman and Shohamy (2016) offered a refreshing look into the transfer and mobility of protest signs from the 2011 summer protests in Tel Aviv to four exhibitions in a teacher training college. What is interesting here is the change of status of those signs from transgressive to authorised, as they moved from open spaces to institutional ones. This highlights the importance of emplacement in the process of re-semiotisation (Iedema, 2003).

Often characterised as a place where 'East meets West', Hong Kong has long been a popular site for linguistic or semiotic landscape research, especially in relation to multilingualism. Previous studies on transgressive signs in the landscape of the city, however, have been few and far between. This may be attributed to the fact that the intentional use of transgressive signs in Hong Kong was relatively infrequent in the past and that they were mostly unsanctioned commercial promotional signs. Unauthorised graffiti or street art, for instance, has been quite rare. Despite the sporadic occurrences of graffiti in Hong Kong, Geiger (2013) considered 13 graffiti styles in relation to the local situated cultural experience, taking into account the practices of rock-carving and inscription in understanding the graffiti in context, while emphasising their transgressive nature with the notion of geosemiotics (Scollon & Scollon, 2003).

In recent years, Hong Kong has seen an explosive proliferation of transgressive signs as a result of the social and political development described earlier in the previous section. An important marker of one's political identity, these transgressive signs are in various forms including posters, stickers and banners. Often found in large quantities as semiotic aggregates on surfaces in public spaces, most notably as colourful collages of messages on Hong Kong's version of Lennon Walls, they collectively express the voice of their producers in key moments

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in social and political movements. The Umbrella Movement in 2014, in particular, has received considerable scholarly attention from a variety of academic disciplines such as communication, politics, linguistics, cultural and religious studies. In the form of visual essay, [Garrett \(2013, 2014\)](#) documented on site a number of protests in Hong Kong from 2012 to 2014 through photographic data and sociological observations to show the struggle of repressed social and political actors in the territory in their attempt to make their voices heard, specifically to offer counter-hegemonic resistance to China's domination. Moving from the physical to the virtual environment, [Wetzstein \(2017\)](#) examined the organisation and thematic patterns of visual discourse of the Hong Kong protests during the Umbrella Movement on Twitter. Also focusing on visual communication as in [Garrett \(2013, 2014\)](#), [Wetzstein \(2017\)](#) similarly investigated the actors who were depicted visually in the protest tweets, including protestors, media workers and the police. In politics, [Macfarlane \(2016\)](#) examined the contextual, cultural and regional background to the protests during the Umbrella Movement, and presented the views of university students on the Movement from online posts. He posited that mainlandisation was the main culprit for these protests and for a range of previous social and political incidents, as the rapid adoption of practices of Mainland China in many spheres of society in Hong Kong "opposed a re-making of the identity of Hong Kong people" ([Macfarlane, 2016](#), p. 145). Following a critical discourse analysis in historiography approach, [Chen and Flowerdew \(2019\)](#) identified and compared the discursive strategies used by mainlanders and Hong Kong Chinese respectively in online comments made on YouTube videos about the Umbrella Movement. They found divergent perspectives between the two social groups with similar ethnic backgrounds, reflecting the distinct Hong Kong identity which is "a unique hybrid of Chinese traditional values and British norms" ([Chen & Flowerdew, 2019](#), p. 551). [Wetzstein \(2017\)](#), [Macfarlane \(2016\)](#) and [Chen and Flowerdew \(2019\)](#) therefore have all shown how the discourse of and surrounding Hong Kong protests is not only physically manifested by signs and artefacts in the real world but also actively constructed in the online world, serving as illustrations of the online-offline nexus which has become part of everyday life in contemporary society ([Blommaert & Maly, 2019](#)).

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Focusing on the discourse of protest in general, however, these studies did not specifically offer detailed analysis of particular signs and only explored identity in passing. Other relevant work has concentrated on different dimensions of the protests, including the playful and witty use of humour in songs and puns to empower marginalised and local points of view (Gan, 2017), and the borrowing of religious symbols and rituals including shrine and funeral offerings by protesters to express their strong beliefs (Bosco, 2016). While these studies have all exemplified the diversity of signs and artefacts involved in the protests around the Umbrella Movement and presented a closer examination of the items concerned, they did not delve into the transgressive nature of these protest items, their role in the semiotic landscape or the ways in which semiotic resources were exploited in such items in the construction or representation of identity.

The most relevant work to date to have investigated protest signs in Hong Kong in the tradition of semiotic landscapes is Lou and Jaworski (2016). Employing the notions of itineraries (Scollon, 2008) and re-semiotisations (Iedema, 2003) in their study of the protest signage used during the Umbrella Movement, Lou and Jaworski (2016) argued that these transgressive signs have the potential to “insert new voices and alternative narratives into the fabric or urban spaces” (p. 612) and alluded to the “emergence and reinforcement of a ‘new’ Hongkonger identity” (p. 609). What this new identity, or rather identities, is/are and how they are realised semiotically in transgressive signs, however, is beyond the scope of their study. Like the previous studies reviewed earlier, they also only focused on the signs used in the Umbrella Movement. As such, no study thus far has examined or traced the use of transgressive signs by a particular group with similar political and social orientations through multiple related events over time in identity construction, representation and development. It therefore remains to be seen how a further understanding of the diachronic evolution of identity can be achieved through the study of transgressive signs and their semiotic realisation in key historical moments over an extended period.

The present study

Through three case studies of transgressive signs observed in a number of key interrelated social and political events in Hong Kong in the past decade, the present study aims to examine and to trace the identities of Hong Kong people participating in these events as constructed and represented in these signs, the semiotic resources used to express such identities, and the strategies associated with the expression of these identities. All the signs examined in the study were collected or captured as digital images personally by the author either on the Internet with due credit given to the original author or physically on site where such signs were found.

Analysis

Case 1 – Umbrella Movement (2014)

At the height of the largest social movement in Hong Kong's history at the time, huge banners supporting the Umbrella Movement and expressing its key demand for universal suffrage appeared at the peak of a number of mountains and hills across the city. The most iconic banner was one which unfurled on a 495-metre high mountain called Lion Rock, aptly named owing to its physical resemblance to a lion perching on its ridge. The hanging of this banner on Lion Rock was considered “a landmark event for the shaping of movement identity” (Wong & Liu, 2018, p. 162). Set against a bright yellow background, the vertical banner showed in simple black outline an umbrella on top of a slogan of five Chinese characters ‘我要真普選’. Written vertically on the banner, the Chinese characters can be literally translated in English as ‘I want genuine universal suffrage’. Immediately below the Chinese characters lay the hashtag ‘#Umbrella Movement’, all in capital letters (see [HuffPost, 2014](#) for a photo of this banner). While the banner was swiftly removed by the government one day after it was hung, photographs of the banner received widespread media attention with overwhelming responses. Like-minded supporters of the movement put up similar banners on prominent spots and landmarks across the

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city, created smaller versions as posters and stickers for rallies and occupied sites, and increasingly used yellow umbrellas not only as a protective shield against tear gas but also as a symbol of resistance in protests ([Wetzstein, 2017](#)). Inspired by this representative banner on the mountain, a netizen designed an image (see [Figure 6.1](#)), used it as his profile picture on social media and shared it with others online ([Ming Pao, 2014](#)).

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Figure 6.1 我要真普選 (I want genuine universal suffrage) – Umbrella Movement

Credit: Vasco Lam

Soon this image went viral both in the online and offline world, illustrating the “invisible lines in the online-offline linguistic landscape” and the use of landscape signs as “traces of (and instruments for) social action” ([Blommaert & Maly, 2019](#), p. 1). Not only was the image used by many Internet users as their profile picture on social media, it was also printed out as a sticker or poster and posted onto walls in public spaces. Originally chosen by social media users to identify who they are politically as part of their virtual identity in the translocal online public sphere, the image soon had a life of its own in the material world, representing the real-life demand and identity of protesters anonymously each time it was reproduced and sited locally in public space.

Semiotically, [Figure 6.1](#) employs both linguistic and visual elements to construct the identity of Movement supporters. Linguistically, [Figure 6.1](#) uses both the traditional Chinese script and English, the two official languages and dominant writing systems in the city, to reflect the unique linguistic identity of people in Hong Kong compared with other parts of China. In traditional Chinese script, the five characters ‘我要真普選’ (I want genuine universal suffrage) feature prominently in the middle of the image, representing a direct, personal and specific demand, locally expressed in a language used by the majority of the population. Indeed, the emphasis on genuineness can only be understood in relation to what is considered ‘fake’ universal suffrage in the city’s political context. In English, the name of the Movement is spelt out at the bottom of the image, capturing the advocacy of such universal values as the freedom of

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speech and of peaceful assembly as well as the right to open and fair elections in the Movement, globally rendered in a language used as a lingua franca worldwide. In this regard, multilingualism as a strategy effectively highlights the local contextualised demand while seeking translocal general support from the international community through the linguistic division of labour where the functions of Chinese and English are complementary and focus on different aspects of the message.

Visually, occupying much of the space of [Figure 6.1](#) is an icon of a yellow umbrella, the de facto logo of the Movement, consisting of three main parts. At the top, the umbrella canopy is in the shape of the silhouette of Lion Rock. Not only is this a direct reference to the original banner hung on the mountain, it also alludes to the ‘Lion Rock Spirit’ – a cultural reference popularised by a television series and a Canto pop song decades ago which applauds the unity and perseverance of Hong Kong people in times of hardship and challenges. In the centre, the shaft of the umbrella is linguistically represented by the five Chinese characters, tactically exploiting the vertical writing possibility of Chinese. Below the shaft lies the handle of the umbrella, linguistically realised through the ingenious deployment of the letter U in the name ‘Umbrella Movement’. As such, not only does the selection of languages serve strategic functions in the textual meaning of the message, it also plays a crucial role in the visual design, making the composition of the theme of the graphic possible. Interestingly then, not only is intersemiotic overlapping between language and image observed here through the textual and visual representation of the notion of umbrella, the same item U is also employed both as a linguistic and graphic device specifically in the partial construction of this same concept through forming part of the word and constituting a component of the icon.

In terms of colour (rendered in grayscale in this volume but in full colour in the original and is available on request), [Figure 6.1](#) follows the original banner’s choice of yellow and black, except that they are inverted in use. The two colours of yellow and black, which came into widespread use both at protest sites and on social media during the Umbrella Movement, arouse instant attention and association with the movement. Serving as examples of “symbolic politics”

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(Günther, 2016), they contribute to the performative force of signs not only in reflecting identity but also in actively performing and shaping identity (Wong & Liu, 2018). Using yellow as the text and graphic colour against a black background, this colour inversion strategically gives prominence to the yellow umbrella, hence highlighting the symbol of the movement, while at the same time signifying the sharp contrast between the high hopes of the movement supporters in bright yellow and the gloomy government oppression and growing interference lurking in the background in black. Alternatively, the image can be read as Lion Rock deep in shadow against the breaking of a new dawn. The Movement, in other words, is metaphorically represented as a beacon of light in a city that has lost its former glory and faded into complete darkness. Through the strategic selection, use and placement of words and graphic in highly symbolic colours, [Figure 6.1](#) powerfully captures the essence of the Movement and appeals to the hearts of supporters both online and offline.

Case 2 – Legislative Council Election (2016) and the Chief Executive Election (2017)

Following the Umbrella Movement, the Hong Kong government proposed an electoral reform package based on the Central government's decision to introduce a nominating committee to handpick the candidates for the Chief Executive Election in 2017. The proposal did not gain the support required from two-thirds of the members of the Legislative Council and was thus rejected, meaning that the existing arrangements of an election committee, rather than a one-person-one-vote system in which any eligible voter could elect and be elected as championed by pro-democracy supporters, would remain.

In this connection, two important elections which changed the ecology of the political scene of Hong Kong took place. One was the Legislative Council Election in 2016 and the other the Chief Executive Election in 2017. While the Umbrella Movement did not bear fruit to any substantial political reform, the two elections were widely seen as opportunities for citizens to again attempt to effect changes in the political system by placing their preferred candidates first

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into the city's unicameral legislature and in turn indirectly into the election committee of the Chief Executive. In this connection, a record number of candidates ran for the election of legislators, making the Legislative Council Election in 2016 the most competitive one of the six times it has been held since the handover.

One of the political parties which participated in this Legislative Council Election is the League of Social Democrats (LSD), a left-wing pro-democracy political affiliation which takes a strong anti-government stance. Sometimes described as a radical opposition party, the members of the League have engaged in hurling objects at politicians and filibustering in the past. Stuck on a tunnel wall with other unsanctioned political and commercial bills and labels, [Figure 6.2](#) was a campaign sticker produced by the party for the Election.

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Figure 6.2 用腳踢走六八九 (Kick out 689)

Credit: The League of Social Democrats

In [Figure 6.2](#), the textual meaning is predominantly realised in Chinese, with the use of English only subtly embedded in the pictorial element. All in traditional Chinese characters, the text placed vertically to the left of the image reads ‘用腳踢走六八九’ (Kick out 689). As a moniker given to the then Chief Executive CY Leung by pro-democracy supporters, the number ‘689’ is a reference to the 689 votes that he received from the 1200-member election committee in the third Chief Executive Election in 2012. It is therefore a metonym for the Hong Kong leader, questioning his electoral mandate and mocking his popularity. At the same time, it also reduces the head of the city to a number through dehumanisation. Phrased as an imperative, the slogan ‘kick out 689’ empowers and invites the reader to be an active agent of the action. The fact that the metaphor ‘kick out’ is employed instead of the more literal rendition of forcing someone to leave also linguistically enforces the idea of treating the recipient of the action as a non-human object which can be hit with one's foot. To make a clear distinction between this vivid call to action and the name of the recipient of the action, the seven characters are colour-

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coded. The first four characters ‘用腳踢走’ denoting the verb of kicking out are in red, while the last three characters ‘六八九’ for the name are in black. This colour coding visually separates the verb from the noun, with the choice of red possibly symbolising sanction by alluding to a red card in a football match.

On the right hand side of the sign, a cartoon shows a foot in a red shoe on top of an insect with its head resembling the portrait of CY Leung. Again, the strategy of dehumanisation is at work here, which synchronises with the intersemiotic homogeneity of text and image. With his bushy eyebrows furrowed and his eyes and mouth shut, the cartoon character has two jets of steam coming out from his exaggerated nostrils, as if he was fuming. Using his two front legs, he is holding a hammer and a sickle. Originally used to represent union and solidarity between the proletariat and the peasantry in many communist movements, the hammer and sickle together form the symbol of the Communist Party of China. With the middle pair of his legs, he is holding a baton and a shield, which are common weapons used by law-enforcement units, including the Hong Kong Police Force. On the shield, a black label apparently reads ‘黑 LICE’ (black lice). Composed of a Chinese character which is rendered as black in English and part of the English word ‘police’, the label can be seen as a blended multilingual item which alludes to police immorality and corruption. On the ground lies a swarm of smaller faceless insects, mobilised and led by the cartoon character. Metaphorically then, the visual representation of the cartoon character symbolises the resources at his disposal from the Chinese Communist Party, the local police unit and the numerous anonymous henchmen.

In the bottom left corner, the logo of the LSD, consisting of a red rose and the four Chinese characters ‘社民連線’ bearing the name of the party, marks the producer of the sticker. The red rose, which is a traditional symbol of the socialist movement in general and represents the LSD specifically in the sign, coordinates in colour with the shoe and the four Chinese characters denoting kicking out. It is therefore this political party that is arguably responsible for taking the lead to dethrone CY Leung. As such, the selection of the red colour here can be

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perceived as a means to signal the agency of the action and to achieve textual and visual coherence.

Case 3 – The Anti-Extradition Bill protests (2019)

With the arrest, conviction and sentencing of some of the key leaders of the Umbrella Movement, the disqualification of some of the pro-democracy legislative councillors through a vow-taking saga following the 2016 Election, and the stepping-down of CY Leung as Chief Executive after the 2017 Election, some believed Hong Kong had returned to a state of political stability. This belief, however, proved an illusion in the summer of 2019 when hundreds of thousands of people, often dressed in black, turned out on the streets to engage in months of events and activities protesting against the extradition bill. One of the key incidents occurring during this period that exposed the deepening fractures of the society and left citizens in shock is known as the Yuen Long attack. As the anti-extradition bill protests escalated, conflicts between the protestors, the police and the government supporters became increasingly intense and sometimes violent. What happened in a district known as Yuen Long, however, took violence to a staggering level that had not been blatantly displayed to the public of the city before.

On a weekend evening after a protest, a group of over 100 masked and armed thugs in white shirts gathered in Yuen Long and started to attack indiscriminately civilians on the streets and at a metro station nearby with rattan canes, wooden poles and metal bars. Alleged to be gang members affiliated with the villages in the neighbourhood, the mob reportedly targeted those wearing black shirts, although they were also seen to attack any journalists, bystanders and passengers including pregnant women and children who happened to be at the sites. At the time, thousands of reports were made to the emergency hotline about the attack. Yet the police only arrived after the mob had safely fled the scene, with no single arrest made on the night. Personally witnessing or even experiencing the incident on site or closely following the incident live through the mass media and/or on the Internet, many people were appalled and outraged by

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the attack. Some questioned and heavily criticised the police for failing to protect the citizens from the attack, with some accusing the police of a possible collusion with the mob. Within days after the incident, public spaces across Hong Kong were filled with posters and stickers condemning the mob and the police. One such example is shown in [Figure 6.3b](#), which was stuck directly onto a government sign placed in a busy traffic interchange consisting of a train station and a bus terminus.

[Insert 15031-4963-SIII-006-Figure-003 Here]

Figure 6.3a (left). A metro sign in Hong Kong

Credit: <http://mtr.hk365day.com>

Figure 6.3b (right). 危險 – 警黑合作 | Danger – Fucking popo and gangs work together

Credit: Unknown

What is instantly recognisable about the transgressive sign in [Figure 6.3b](#) to most local people is its similarity to a typical sign found in metro stations around the city (see [Figure 6.3a](#)). In the recent months when the anti-extradition bill protests were taking place, metro stations and their adjacent areas were key sites where clashes occurred. On some occasions, train services on the metro lines were also disrupted by acts of civil disobedience as part of the protests. The metro, locally known as the Mass Transit Railway or MTR in short, can thus be considered a major stakeholder in this series of events. Indeed, many transgressive signs relating to the anti-extradition bill protests appropriate the design of MTR signs. This strategy of appropriation is obvious in the transgressive sign in [Figure 6.3b](#), which shares the same stylistic devices in both text and image as those in [Figure 6.3a](#). Both signs have the same spatial arrangement, with the picture occupying the top part and the text the bottom part of the sign. Visually, pictures on both signs involve the enclosure of black stick figure(s) in a red circle. Textually, both signs adopt the same font style and use the same words in both traditional Chinese (危險) and English (danger) to draw attention in red with the rest of the text in black. They also follow the same order of

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languages – Chinese precedes English on a single line and Chinese on top of English on different lines. In terms of font size, the Chinese characters are relatively larger than the English words in both signs. All these semiotic choices make the two signs strikingly similar, possibly giving the impression that they share the same producer, especially to those who pay little attention to the actual contents of the signs.

A more detailed look at the transgressive sign, of course, reveals its highly subversive nature. In the picture, two stick figures are standing literally shoulder to shoulder. On the left, a figure is lifting up a long rod-shaped object resembling a baseball bat. On the right, a figure is raising its arm above its head, with a peaked cap on its head and a belt pouch holster commonly used to conceal a hand pistol around the waist. If there is any doubt concerning the identities of the two figures in this picture, it is quickly dispelled by the text underneath. Below the textual warning of danger, the sign reads ‘警黑合作’ in Chinese and ‘Fucking popo and gangs work together’ in English. Literally translated as the police and the black colour respectively, the first two traditional Chinese characters in this context allude specifically to the police department and the thugs involved in the Yuen Long attack who are alleged members of criminal organisations, known in Cantonese as ‘the black society’ in Hong Kong. With the last two Chinese characters meaning cooperation in English, the four-character Chinese caption is similar in propositional meaning to the six words in English. In the latter, however, the police is referred to by an emotionally charged expression ‘fucking popo’, consisting of an offensive expletive followed by a derogatory term for the law-enforcement unit, reputedly to be either a slang word for a police officer originating from Southern California in the 1980s ([The Urban Dictionary, 2019](#)) or a name commonly used for dogs in Chinese ([LIHKG, 2019](#)). In this sense then, the messages in Chinese and English serve to reinforce each other through the repetition of content. This reinforcement is further amplified by the intersemiotic homogeneity between text and image.

Discussion

The three case studies have clearly shown that linguistic analysis alone is not sufficient for understanding identity construction and representation, as identity is essentially a product not only of linguistic but also of other semiotic practices ([Bucholtz & Hall, 2005](#)). In all three cases, we see fruitful interactions among the semiotic resources of text, image and colour in the expression, construction and development of three highly contextualised, time-sensitive but interconnected identities: as supporters of the Umbrella Movement, as opponents of CY Leung, and as opponents of police-gang collusion. In this respect, all three identities involve “local, ethnographically specific cultural positions” and “temporary and interactionally specific stances and participant roles” rather than “macro-level demographic categories” ([Bucholtz & Hall, 2005](#), p. 592), highlighting the intra-national and even intra-territorial identity conflict experienced by many in the city. Indeed, these three interrelated anti-government identities are closely intertwined with the lived experiences of Hong Kong people. In constructing the first identity, the sign producer employs a number of strategies which appeal to the similarities among in-group members: the local knowledge of the physical shape of Lion Rock, the shared cultural reference of the ‘Lion Rock spirit’, and the unanimous demand of genuine universal suffrage. The specific semiotic tropes used to represent this identity includes the yellow colour, the umbrella and Lion Rock as visual icons and the linguistic slogans expressing the demand and the name of the Movement. In constructing the second and the third identities, both sign producers underscore the interactional nature of self by relating and implicitly comparing self to the locally based cultural other. In other words, the issue of who we are is indirectly addressed by who we are not. Identity thus is a “situationally co-constructed performance ratified by others” ([Blommaert & Maly, 2019](#), p. 3). In the second case, CY Leung as the cultural other is portrayed through the strategy of dehumanisation, realised linguistically by a number and visually by an insect. As such, the human identity of self is emphasised, which strengthens the strategy of empowerment used to encourage in-group members to be the active agent in kicking out CY Leung through both the linguistic and visual tropes of metaphor. Additionally, the strategy of

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association with groups deemed undesirable is used to connect CY Leung with Communism and the corrupt police through visual symbolism. In the third case, the police as the cultural other is portrayed also by the strategy of association with an undesirable group, this time the gang, both linguistically through a four-character slogan juxtaposing the two together and visually through a picture depicting the two parties on friendly terms. To appeal to the similarities among in-group members as in the first case, the sign producer of the third case uses the strategy of appropriation to evoke the common knowledge and experience of the MTR, realised through a mix of linguistic and visual tropes including the use of typical terms on local metro signs, the stick figures in an enclosed circle, the font styles and sizes, and the overall spatial arrangement. These three transgressive signs distinctly marking three separate but interrelated key social and political events hence show how the collective anti-government identities of people in Hong Kong have been formulated, developed and forged (cf. [Wong & Liu, 2018](#)), from focusing on the self and the ideal to involving the cultural other and the cruel reality.

To allow for a more focused and detailed analysis of the semiotic resources and strategies used in the signs, close-up shots are shown for illustrative purposes of the study. It is however obvious from the analysis earlier that these transgressive signs were highly contextualised both in space and time, interacting with signs not only in a particular physical landscape at a specific time period but also increasingly in the online world. Indeed, many transgressive signs observed in the social and political events in recent years in Hong Kong have originated as a digital image. In some cases, especially for the more popular signs, the creation process involves not one single author but numerous mostly anonymous authors jointly responsible for the design, editing and sharing of the signs. The rapid and widespread distribution of digital signs, in particular, is made possible through the prevalence of social media platforms and mobile apps such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, Telegram and the locally based forum website LIHKG. Such derivative work of transgressive signs, in turn, represents collaborative efforts expressing a collective political identity. Not only are these signs commonly used as profile images on social media which are themselves an important marker of one's online personal identity, they are also

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frequently printed out and displayed offline in sites of contest in the material world. Often found together with tens or even hundreds of other transgressive signs in the forms of stickers, posters or banners, sometimes in multiple layers on surfaces in public spaces, these transgressive signs have their second life as physical artefacts. These physical artefacts may in turn be digitally captured as images and circulated online again, thus going through yet another round of transformation. From indexing a named individual online identity on social media to an anonymous collective offline identity on Lennon Wall, these transgressive signs demonstrate that re-semiotisation not only occurs in the material world when signs are physically transferred from one place to another (cf. [Waksman & Shohamy, 2016](#)); it also operates, and perhaps more so now than ever, in the transfer of signs between the online and offline worlds (cf. [Blommaert & Maly, 2019](#); [Lou & Jaworski, 2016](#)). In this respect then, any study of transgressive signs used intentionally in the contemporary society, especially those which are subversive in nature, must take into consideration the evolution of such signs from legitimate online creations to unauthorised physical artefacts through their emplacement in unsanctioned locations, and the issue of multiple re-appropriation, re-emplacement and re-transformation of such signs as they continue their lives in the real and virtual space. This raises such questions as whether transgressive signs are only transgressive by virtue of their physical emplacement in the material world, whether signs displayed on mobile phones in unauthorised public events are transgressive, whether digital signs can be transgressive if they are ‘out of place’ online, and if so what constitutes transgression for digital signs. Questions like these challenge our existing notion of transgressive signs and call for a reassessment of the notion in the digital age.

Conclusion

This book chapter has examined the intentional use of transgressive signs in a series of recent anti-government social and political events in Hong Kong. Through the detailed qualitative analysis of three cases of transgressive signs, the study presented in this chapter has described

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and discussed the identities of Hong Kong people participating in such interrelated events as constructed, represented and developed in such signs, the semiotic resources and strategies employed, and the relationship between such semiotic resources and strategies. Such an analysis cannot be made without the consideration of the lived experiences of Hong Kong people, the process of creation, appropriation and distribution of these signs, and the increasingly common crossover of signs between the online and offline worlds. Importantly, the study has demonstrated that transgressive signs are powerful tools for individuals and groups to make a statement and to express their personal and collective identities. It has also shown the methodological value of conducting a semiotic analysis of transgressive signs in understanding identity. The scope of the present study only permits the analysis of some of the many facets of identity from the perspective of Hong Kong people participating in these interrelated social and political events. Further studies can examine the signs used by opponents of these events to explore the other identities of people in the city, and to compare the identities of people in Hong Kong with those in other Asian contexts. The notion of digital transgressive signs, which has not been explored thus far in linguistic or semiotic landscape research, also requires urgent academic consideration and discussion. It is hoped that this chapter can promote more work in this area to enrich our understanding of identity through linguistic landscape research.

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