IN ENGLISH, THE NOUN UMBRELLA comes from the Latin umbella, meaning flat-topped flower, and from umbro, meaning shade: a flower that protects. In written Chinese, however, the character used for umbrella is not a noun, but a verb, ‘to block’ (遮).  
While these roots share a common idea – of defence and safety – they also allude to divergent meanings. One is static and organic, the other mobile and proactive. Both represent something important about the protests.  
While some – particularly international – reports have depicted the Umbrella Movement as being relatively homogenous and cohesive, the protests have in fact been extremely heterogenous. As the contributions to this issue demonstrate, participants have been focused on action rather than reaction; on their resistance rather than a unifying narrative. Indeed, Cantonese-speaking friends tell me that few people actually used the terms ‘umbrella’ or ‘movement’ in everyday discussions. Conversations are more grounded in action.  
"Did you occupy Admiralty? Did you sit-in?" This gap between representation and reality shows the value of sociology in making sense of unfolding social and political events.

In 1959, the sociologist C Wright Mills published a now-famous book called The Sociological Imagination. In it, Mills outlines a way of thinking that links the micro-level of everyday experience with the macro-level of structural change, between what he calls ‘private troubles’ and ‘public issues’. By shuttling back and forth between these levels, Mills thought it possible to relate large-scale political and economic shifts to personal decision-making. Cultivating this approach means not only an ability to analyze the emergent aspects of social life – of history ‘in-the-making’ – but also in grasping the significance of individual action in altering its path. In demonstrating the contingent nature of life, Mills thought that sociology could promote social activism.

Fifty-five years later, this way of thinking remains an indispensable tool in understanding current social change and, importantly, one not reserved solely for academics. In many ways the Umbrella Movement involved the rapid development of a kind of mass sociological imagination, in which a direct connection between individual choice and structural change became obvious for a sizable population. The private troubles of individuals, families and communities became fused with the public issue of political representation, and it became clear that action was possible.

As the student contributions to this issue show, the forms of involvement varied tremendously – from steadfast occupiers to online translators, quiet contributors to logistical coordinators – but were nonetheless unified under the banner of collective action. In this sense, the English roots of umbrella and umbr are particularly apt – these actions represent the flowering of an organic form of grassroots politics that is both powerful and protective. This unifying umbrella brought together people from varying backgrounds and political stripes, and created space for an exchange of minority groups to have a voice. Indeed, what has often been missed is that this particular social movement has been a particularly social movement. Though many came to the protest sites for the politics, many stayed for the community. In a city so keenly focused on individual success, where living spaces are so incredibly cramped, the occupy sites were a revelation. Collectively, participants redefined the space – from a spaghetti-junction choked with taxis, buses and fumes to a spontaneous space of quiet defiance and interdependent connection. The expansive spaces of the protests sites also proved to be fertile soil for the growth of creativity, as art and resistance came together in the form of sculpture, banners, and DIY post-its.

As some of the other contributions here illustrate, however, perhaps beneath this umbrella reveals a complex range of social divisions: the creation of community is both inclusive and exclusive. During the height of the protests, suddenly you were in or out, for or against, yellow or blue. In this context, the Chinese verb for umbrella, ‘to block’, helps to clarify more than the English. The protests were mobile, active, defiant – in turn, tensions based on gender, social class and political orientation added up into a multidimensional, rumour and conspiracy flourished. What this shows is that sociology could promote social activism, that sociology could promote social activism.

The government thus becomes less and less accountable to the needs of the public, as evidenced in increasing housing unaffordability. The government thus becomes less and less accountable to the needs of the public, as evidenced in increasing housing unaffordability. Since the 1990s, Hong Kong has developed into what Saskia Sassen calls a global city that witnesses a polarising occupational structure and widening income inequality, the manifestations of which are multi-faceted. For instance, housing becomes increasingly unaffordable for the average household, hence the ever-lengthening waiting list for public housing, and the ‘popularity’ of sub-divided units, i.e., partitioned rooms in flats often located in poorly maintained old residential buildings, as an option of accommodation. This is not helped by skyrocketing property prices, but the government’s commitment to restructuring the housing market and land supply, which is vital for curbing speculative activities, is also conspicuously absent. The dismay of the public is visualized in the Umbrella Movement: protesters label their tents with the names of luxury residences, so as to mock the government’s failure to provide people shelter.

Housing policy exemplifies the government’s departure from a redistributive agenda. With the ascendency of the neoliberal doctrine in public policy-making since the late colonial era, emphasis has been placed on minimising public expenditure, purportedly geared towards making public administration more efficient and raising the competitiveness of the local economy in the global market. This explains the gradual withdrawal of the role of the government from housing provision, and in relation to this urban planning, as in the case of the provision of education and medicine. The government thus becomes less and less accountable to the needs and interests of the public, as evidenced in increasing housing unaffordability.

The structural weakness of governance: a look at the legislature

Since the Handover of Sovereignty in 1997, social conflict and popular mobilization have been challenging the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) Government. This culminated in the Umbrella Movement: the call for universal suffrage he people’s grievances about the government’s incapability in alleviating socio-economic inequalities and the attendant problems. I will argue that such incompetence is rooted in the ‘built-in’ weaknesses of Hong Kong’s political structure.

Problem on the surface: inequalities in the global city

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Structural weakness of governance: a look at the legislature

Bucking the trend of neoliberalism is not easy in a globalizing economy and will not singularly help the government’s dwindling accountability to the public. Conservative budget practices, an executive-led government and elitist rule were hallmarks of Hong Kong’s colonial rule and were considered essential to the maintenance of the city’s capitalist way of life after the handover in 1997. Written into, and guaranteed in, the Basic Law is the skewed power distribution in favour of pro-business, pro-Beijing functional interests in the political institutional set-up. According to the Basic Law, the Legislative Council (Legco) should be made up of an identical number of seats returned from the directly-elected geographic constituencies.

Fifty-five years later, this way of thinking remains an indispensable tool in understanding current social change and, importantly, one not reserved solely for academics. In many ways the Umbrella Movement involved the rapid development of a kind of mass sociological imagination, in which a direct connection between individual choice and structural change became obvious for a sizable population. The private troubles of individuals, families and communities became fused with the public issue of political representation, and it became clear that action was possible.

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Youth participation in the Umbrella Movement: the role of new media

Compiled by Carmen Tong

OCCUPIERS AND ORDINARY PEOPLE, Au King, Hong Kongers found themselves glided to different new media since teargas swept the streets of Admiralty. News and updates diffused quickly beyond the territory through multilingual updates on Facebook. Working with almost 800 translators, I witnessed the eagerness of netizens' engagement in the Umbrella Movement. Notwithstanding the reservations of its critics, new media play a crucial role in the mobilization of social movements across the world. Indeed, for the younger generation in Hong Kong, new media is the platform through which they exchange information and perspectives, engage in dialogues, make their voices heard, coordinate resource mobilization, hence enhance their rights and empower themselves as citizens. New media is indispensable as a public sphere for them, as the following 4 narratives testify.

Wing-sum Leung
Like many, I was only an "information receiver" at the beginning of the movement. Not until the birth of a particular Facebook page did I realize the power of technolog. Different Facebook pages appeared simultaneously when protesters began occupying the streets. First-hand and timely updates, as well as information about locations of resource stations and strategies of student organizations, etc., became available online. The overflow of news and rumours caught the attention of some students in journalism, who then set up a news aggregation tool to filter the news. This page soon attracted thousands of followers and made its impact by rectifying the inaccuracies spotted on other Facebook pages. This was a ground-breaking idea for me.

Hoping to enhance communications between students, I came up with the idea of building a platform for students to share and discuss our thoughts on the movement and political reform in Hong Kong. Instead of sleeping on the streets, my friends and I began channeling our energy into talking and reading. We met to discuss key arguments from the literature and interviews with scholars, and presented them on our own page. We also conducted our own interviews with other university students to generate dialogue about how long-term measures can be implemented for citizens to achieve genuine universal suffrage. Our Facebook page has transformed my experience in the movement; from a mere observer on the streets to an active participant focusing on social deliberation and lobbying. I believe my experience is not unique. Social media helps democracy and the movements achieve their purposes. Their participation both quantitatively and qualitatively, in a manner possibly no other medium can match.

Alvin Yau
The ignition of the first teargas bomb was not only witnessed live by virtue of internet. As live as the guns, discussions about the police's action permeated into virtually all social networking sites and chat groups, constantly notifying and reminding me about the survival development in those days. There was no escape from the sense of urgency and emotion that drives the most inert person into action, in real or virtual reality. Largely a "keyboard fighter" behind the screen in the events, I joined one of my classmates, who witnessed teargas bombs unerringly tossed into a first-aid station, in forming a group dedicated to making first-aid packs for medical stations. With students and staff working together, resources were quickly gathered, and the first-aid packs were quickly appropriated and shared among the protesters. Social boundaries were no longer in effect in the light of a greater cause. People joined different groups when needed, and they parted ways when the group's mission was accomplished. Instant, bottom-up coordination, as exemplified by the work of our group, is hardly a rarity. To maximize the use of resources between occupy locations, a centralized online spreadsheet was developed and circulated among netizens. Users gained anonymous to each other, yet worked together to optimize resource distribution. Although the movement has ended for now, efforts and the handiworks of Hong Kong citizens will forever be stored as zeros and ones on the internet, reminiscent of our glory.

Min-shuo Zhou
The hubbub of the Umbrella Movement has gradually died down. While I was not a protester at the frontline, I still feel involved for what I did in transforming the movement via social media to family and friends in mainland China. In mainland China, official media did not report the movement and social media was placed under surveillance.When you typed "Umbrella Movement" in Baidu, China's most popular search engine, you would be reminded that, "according to laws and regulations 'none results' can be found". This means all information has been filtered. Despite that, the government's great efforts in blocking information, people in mainland China were not completely in the dark. Weibo, the Chinese Twitter, is the most fascinating platform - because of its most tactful users. You need to play with words, for example using allusion or puns, when conveying sensitive issues. Amid rumours of the 14 September National Day, I voiced on Weibo my disappointment with some mainland students' apathy and my concerns for those on the streets, in a succinct posting: "Hong Kong" or "Umbrella Movement". This triggered my friends' curiosity, even though not everyone was sympathetic. Afterwards, I elaborated my concerns using "Moments" in WeChat, the WhatsApp counterpart of Sina's censorship on Weibo. When I reposted pictures and articles from Facebook onto my 'Moments', they generated constructive responses, and I felt my efforts in bringing the truth and concern for Hong Kong to people in mainland China had not been in vain.

Hok-see Siu
"I would like to do a documentary. Can I videotape your friends for the documentary?" This was my opening question to the interviewees in the documentary I made. During the Umbrella Movement, young people were constantly criticized, mainly by their elders, for being unrealistic and selfish. Indeed, before they had never listened to their partners' dreams! I was especially reminiscent of our glory. I started to record young people's ideas in their own voice for my documentary project. I discovered that, beneath the slogan "I want genuine election", different protesters harbour different agendas about working towards a better Hong Kong.

One protester would like to run a quality bakery with reasonable prices for ordinary people; some would like to become teachers who nurture civic-minded students; others would like to be professional journalists who work for the public. It was most interesting to learn that some of these students had never listened to their partner's dream! I was especially touched by two junior college boys who were preparing for their school test under the streetlights. They chose not to go to the study area which had proper chairs and desks, because they felt that the students taking public examinations were more in need. Despite their different backgrounds, these young people were all trying to strive for the public good. People say Hong Kong is dying, but the aspirations of young people are sparks in a seemingly hopeless situation. I still believe as long as we work out our individual dreams, a better Hong Kong will be born! My documentary is designed to preserve the present, so that neither our wishes nor our longing for democracy can be eroded by time.

Reference

Below: From the provision of supplies to the treatment of injuries and the provision of information, the shared social media was exchanged red and exchanged in the Umbrella Movement.