



Above: Participants of the Winter School.

Global Debates, Local Realities

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2017 IIAS-SSRC Winter School on Media Activism and Postcolonial Futures in Hong Kong

IN AN ATTEMPT TO CHALLENGE established accounts of new technologies as mechanisms of 'liberation' in post-colonial societies, the Social Science Research Council and the International Institute for Asian Studies jointly organized a Winter School (Masterclass) in Hong Kong. The topic 'Media Activism and Postcolonial Futures' was carefully chosen to offer young academics the opportunity to engage in debates concerning the ways global power relations and thus postcolonial contexts influence practices in political and media activism.

From January 16th to January 21st a group of 25 PhD students from various regions and disciplinary backgrounds were given the chance to engage in lively academic debates, convenor-led sessions and field research. The Winter School was hosted at the C-Centre of the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) with conveners Francis Lee and Jack Linchuan Qiu (School of Journalism and Communication, the Chinese University of Hong Kong and the C-Centre, Hong Kong); Paula Chakravartty (Department of Media, Culture and Communication and the Gallatin School, New York University, US); Zaharom Nain (The University of Nottingham Malaysia Campus); and Srirupa Roy (University of Gottingen's Centre for Modern Indian Studies (CeMIS), Germany).

The preview

Twenty years since the handover from British to Chinese sovereignty, Hong Kong posed as the ideal place for an intensive dive into current academic debates on post colonialism and means of digital communication for achieving social change. Having undergone months-long protests, broadly mediated via various social media channels with the 2014 'Umbrella Movement', Hong Kong offered both the postcolonial context and the highly networked activist scene. Prior to the excursion, all participants engaged with extensive writings on the Umbrella Movement, ethnicity and media, class, power and populism. Additionally, all participants could choose one organization for their field research, from either the media flagship 'Apple Daily', the activist medium 'HK-In-Media', or the social activist and support group 'Hong Kong Mission for Migrant Workers'.

The start

To gain insight into the city's vast population of migrant workers from South East Asia, particularly the Philippines and Indonesia, the last group got a head start. Most domestic helpers have their only day off on Sundays, which they spend in parks, walkways, or on the empty streets of Hong Kong's shopping districts: Central and Admiralty. One day before the Winter School officially started, the Mission for Migrant Workers offered to introduce several self-organized workers' groups to the participants. Besides a union representative and LGBTQ activists, the group spoke to the representative of the Mission for Migrant Workers, Cynthia Abdon-Tellez. The first and brief impressions of this community left many questions for the coming field research including the importance of space in the discourse on migrant labor, particularly in a trade hub like Hong Kong.

On the New Asia College Campus of CUHK the participants were confronted with the challenges of a myriad of modern Hong Kongese cultural identities influenced by classical and neo-classical Chinese culture and philosophy, local minority group practices and beliefs, as well as western strands of ideas. The disciplinary backgrounds of the participants ranged from film and theater, architecture, linguistics, area studies, to political sciences, and anthropology. This richness of perspectives helped to engage with new arguments, deconstruct established concepts and to develop interdisciplinary approaches for the field trips.

The sessions

As an introduction, the first two sessions focused on pro-democracy activism in Hong Kong and labor activism in the People's Republic of China. Francis Lee introduced the debates surrounding the Umbrella Movement highlighting the usage of digital media and the diverse strands of political ideology within the pro-democracy camp. Jack Qiu led the second session concerning the global market and digital labor. Comparing the slave trade since the 16th century to the contemporary exploitation of labor in the production of new technologies, he introduced his concept of iSlavery. Finally he countered questions on how global chains of production and consumption could be controlled, and exploitation could be challenged through activism with a call for conscious digital abolitionism.

Zaharom Nain took up a case from contemporary politics in Indonesia during his session on 'Media, Ethnicity and Religion in South East Asia'. The case highlighted the way existing divides could be enhanced through campaigns and new media. The two joined sessions led by Srirupa Roy and Paula Chakravartty provided historical context through comparisons to 20th century movements and tackling general theoretical concepts. The groups engaged in heated debates relating current global political trends to new modes of communication, analyzing whether established power dynamics could be challenged. With Cherian George's guest lecture on Anti-Democratic Activism and his concept of hate spin, based on case studies of religious campaigning, the participants got to engage in another aspect of media politics.

Besides leading to more questions on how to research the influence of changing modes of communication on different societies or global communities, the sessions also helped to create a common starting point for the fieldwork.

The field

For two and a half days, the three research groups could explore the city and visit their respective organizations. Key to the development of a case was not only the interviews with the organization representatives, but also the contextualization of the observations, making the city an important part of the group work.

The Apple Daily group got the chance to visit an established print medium with one of the largest groups of daily readers. They were invited to tour the facilities and the newsroom and had discussions with the editor-in-chief and the head of the video division, 'Action News'. Their research on the media outlet presented them with a paper that was avant-garde when Jimmy Lai founded it in 1995. It dramatically lowered the price of its daily from the industry standard and provided mostly

sensational content. Adapting early to digital technologies, Apple Daily provided a local example for challenges to the global communication industry like paid content and digital advertising revenue. Within the political spectrum of Hong Kong, Apple Daily always took a pro-democracy stand, and catered to the middleclass with political commentary by well-known academics. The outlet supported the protestors during the 2014 Umbrella Movement, and faced cyber attacks and blockades of its delivery trucks, losing advertisers in the process.

The impressions from their visit presented the group with an outlet that mirrored the tensions between Hong Kong and China, and digital and print media. Their presentation portrayed the paper's development, and perspectives on its reporting. Despite the criticism of its sensationalist content, the group highlighted the paper's strong stance in fighting for the rights of the people. Whether this counts as media activism was of some debate within the group, considering the paper's stance as pro-market; perhaps this was just marketing strategy. Nonetheless, perhaps Apple Daily represents new forms of media activism in the 21st century.

This kind of reporting has paved the way for new strands of online journalism. Talking to the producers of HK-In Media the second group got to explore new ways of news creation and activism. The group visited the office and editorial board of the media outlet, which had been established in a reaction to the extensive political rallies in 2003 opposing legal reforms. At a briefing by one of its editors, Betty Lau Hin, it became clear that the role and growth of the portal was closely linked to the city's social movements. They worked with different civil society groups to promote democracy, as well as provide a space for public discussion on political, social and environmental issues.

In 2009 the outlet started to provide professional coverage from the ground replacing the majority of their content consisting of mere contributions of individuals and organizations. According to Lau, this shift enabled it to offer alternative and quick coverage during protests. In-media's fans on Facebook rose dramatically. The growing popularity of Facebook also meant that civil society groups that used In-media as a platform, shifted their dissemination and communication strategies directly to the social media. The theater performance of the research group during their presentation showed how they had been inspired by this citizens' initiative that has taken on the politically- and financially-powerful, and facilitated public discussions and interrogation of democracy.

For a long time, the issue of migrant workers, their lives in the metropolis, and their lack of employment rights had been of little interest for the majority population of Hong Kong. With the Mission for Migrant Workers, a platform and safeguard had been founded for the disenfranchised domestic helpers of the city. Highly networked with labor, human, and women's rights organizations around the city, the Mission had managed to become a powerful advocate concerning both local and international cases of abuse and fraud.

Besides the Sunday excursion the research group was invited to the small office to speak with Cynthia. She exposed the power dynamics by portraying the journey of domestic helpers, including the role of their governments and local agencies, giving an insight into the working and living conditions in the most dehumanizing and obscure places of the employers' homes, and introducing high profile abuse cases. The migrant worker's role in Hong Kong's working society, how the lack of space influenced their lives, and ways and tools that were used for communication and networking dominated the group's discussion. Most migrant groups were not represented in Hong Kong political organizations and seemed to lack real leverage. Nonetheless, the worker's struggle to build and uphold friendships, hobbies or political activism despite a lack of space and time, were remarkable. From interest groups, dance instruction, self-funded independent magazines to self help groups, a sub-community had been established, reaching to fellow workers around the globe.

Eventually the research group struggled with their presentation, trying to include all aspects of this diverse, international group of individuals and their activism. The exchanges at the Mission for Migrant Workers and the Domestic Workers Union emphasized the ways in which post-colonial societies remained in economic dependencies and how media could both help to create a platform for disenfranchised people or be used for exclusionary campaigning.

The research groups had jointly explored different strands of communication and media production, activism and post-colonial societies. The social networks Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter proved important for research, communication and documentation. As serendipity was highlighted as key to exploration, the participants ventured out to the city and gathered for tea and karaoke, engaging in fruitful debates. Finally it weren't only the lectures, or the interaction with journalists, activists and those in between that made this Winter School memorable, but also these casual encounters.

Report by Winter School participants: Sarah McKeever, Anna Julia Fiedler, Gayathry Venkiteswaran.