

“Happy Birthday to You”: Music as Nonviolent Weapon in the Umbrella Movement

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Abstract

In protests, music and sound often play a cardinal role in unifying individuals via social performances in which they voice out mutual political demands. During the 79-day Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong in the autumn of 2014, many forms of music and sound that are expected in local protests were heard, including slogan-chanting, booing, and the collective singing of Cantopop songs. However, performances of “Happy Birthday to You” and other “inappropriate” songs—that is, “nonsensical” events—were heard as well. These sonic events first occurred unexpectedly and ironically in the demonstration sites, but were nonetheless grasped and performed as a political act, functioning as nonviolent weapons used to “attack” political opponents. These nonsensical musical acts soon began to make sense or sound meaningful as protesters recontextualized the lighthearted nature of these songs to particular situations in the protest and adapted this paradoxical experience into the idea of 無厘頭 *mouleitau*, a cultural phenomenon that appears in Hong Kong films and other media platforms to represent a sense of localism. Drawing from insights in musicology, sound studies and critical theory, this article adopts an interdisciplinary approach to study the role of these unexpected sounds in the Umbrella Movement. In particular, this article explores how and why nonsensical musical acts were appropriated and put to political use in the protest space.

As I exit Admiralty MTR station, I hear a familiar birthday song and some applause coming from Admiralty Centre, a commercial building and shopping center located next to the station and the Government Headquarters. There are around a hundred people gathered in a circle, amusingly singing “Happy Birthday to You” and clapping regularly to the beat. However, it quickly becomes clear this is not a birthday celebration, but rather a moment of protest happening near the occupied sites in Admiralty on the evening of October 7, 2014. This is the tenth day of the Umbrella Movement, also known as “Occupy Central with Love and Peace.” The singing crowd surrounds one of the city’s notorious pro-government activists, Leticia Lee See-yin, as she delivers a dogmatic protest against the pro-democracy dissenters in the occupied area. Despite the fact that Lee later grabs a megaphone in an attempt to shout over the singing flock, the collective singing

voices of “Happy Birthday to You” dominate the soundscape incessantly until Lee steps away from Admiralty Centre.

The Umbrella Movement was a non-violent pro-democracy protest that unfolded across Hong Kong from September 28 to December 15, 2014. In response to the proposed electoral reform, protesters demanded a free and fair election of the Chief Executive and members of the Hong Kong Legislative Council. They occupied major roads connecting busy commercial areas in three main districts: Admiralty, Causeway Bay and Mong Kok. The protest had a unique context and presented idiosyncratic human relations and events on the streets that in some instances allowed music and sound to become a form of political action. During the first two weeks, the soundscape of the occupied areas consisted almost entirely of public speeches, collective silence, collective slogan-chanting and the singing of renowned tunes and Cantopop songs, the most popular musical genre in the city.¹ These conventional sonic acts sometimes went beyond verbal expressions, and yet were directed by social semiotics and cultural discourses. Such acts can be typically found in other recent major local protests, such as the annual July 1 Political March and the Anti-National Education Occupy in 2012. Nonviolent protest, as Gene Sharp puts it, primarily consists of symbolic acts of peaceful opposition or of attempted persuasion, which wield power effectively by disrupting the status quo (18, 25, 84). Furthermore, I would add that such power is generated through *meaningful* collective sonic acts in particular. In the Umbrella Movement, expected music and sound permeated the protest space, functioning as a dissonant voice (sometimes as an inaudible voice, as in the case of collective silence). These expected events “sonicalized” the everyday public space and formed an important part of the protesters’ politically meaningful participation in the Umbrella Movement.

The vignette at the beginning of this article brings attention to a frequent and specific, yet unexpected, musical act during the Umbrella Movement. Whenever there was a quarrel between protesters with opposing political views, pro-democracy occupiers immediately gathered around them, often encircling the anti-occupy protester(s),² and sung the birthday ditty before the squabble turned into any serious or violent conflict. Performing the birthday song became a nonviolent tactic to keep out anti-occupy activists or anyone holding a political

¹ Cantopop is a musical genre that encompasses commercial popular music songs sung largely in Cantonese. Cantonese is a form of 粵 Yue Chinese commonly spoken in Hong Kong, while Cantopop is the most popular genre in the city and is strongly connected to local culture and its “glory days” of the 80s and 90s.

² These anti-occupy activists usually appeared individually or in small groups. Many occupiers and supporters believe that these anti-occupy activists aimed to arouse occupiers’ negative emotions in order to create violent or chaotic scenes in the peaceful and nonviolent demonstration.

position opposed to that of the occupiers. The musical sound of “Happy Birthday to You” was indeed a “nonsensical” occurrence the very first time it appeared in the protest. However, soon after there was a change of attitude among some participants for whom the song began to make sense and have meaning in the context of the movement. These participants recontextualized the music during particular situations of the protest and adapted these experiences into the idea of 無厘頭 *mouleitau*, a cultural phenomenon that relates to the idea of unexpected and nonsensical events and often appears in Hong Kong films and other media platforms to represent a sense of localism. Later, more renowned tunes that were originally deemed “inappropriate” for protests were performed as a kind of nonviolent weapon. The agentive nature of the musical acts serves to actuate thoughts and discourses about local protests through performance. This actuation draws individuals from a state of subjective expression to one of collective engagement and social legitimacy, provoking a “musical and sonic public” (Born 35) that nonetheless buttresses or transforms individuals’ identities and actions. The unexpected musical acts functioned as politically effective tools to defend the occupied space. This served to fortify the local public discourse of “music as a vehicle for political change,” a discourse that sprung out of the advocacy protests that arose in response to the Tiananmen Protests in 1989. This discourse stands in stark contrast to another concurrent discourse, “music as (purely) entertainment,” an idea that resonates with the Adornian perspective according to which music has a “soporific” effect on social consciousness. This article discusses how the musical performances of “Happy Birthday to You” and other inappropriate songs are shaped by the cultural context in which they are situated (particularly by the *mouleitau* phenomenon). Furthermore, this article looks at how these musical acts are influenced by public discourses surrounding the social aesthetics of music in protest and in Hong Kong overall, and thus how they came to be surprisingly effective in easing tension at the protest sites.

Controversies about Music in Local Protests

The debate on musical performance in political demonstrations emerged a few years ago as more and more protesters felt disappointed after participating in various nonviolent social protests in recent years. However, this controversy noticeably swelled during and after the Umbrella Movement.³ “Universal Suffrage” and “True Democracy” are

³ There are a number of criticisms on the usefulness of collective singing and other nonviolent acts, particularly on the blogosphere such as *HKGGolden*, an online discussion forum operated by locals. An example of such criticism on “Boundless Oceans Vast Skies,” a Cantopop song often sung in local protests, can be found online (KW Wong).

not only slogans chanted by tens of thousands of Hongkongers during the protest; they are also shared political goals that were not realized by means of nonviolent action. Following the Occupy, some locals started to question the appropriateness and usefulness of nonviolent action and the musicality attached to it in generating political change. In particular, they came to believe that the ritualistic nature of the June 4 Commemorative Candlelight Vigil⁴ and practices such as collective singing and slogan-chanting in other nonviolent protests are largely ineffective in defending Hong Kong's autonomy as well as people's freedom and rights. Some of these citizens claim that the vigil and other "non-confrontational" protests (such as the annual July 1 Political March) have become political ritual that merely exist as a form of narcissism. They further assert that, instead of acting rebelliously to subvert the hegemony like "real warriors," participants of non-confrontational protests do not exhibit "real" action at all (Ng, "10 years in Hong Kong"). Pacifists or nonviolent protesters who sing, perform music and chant slogans in demonstrations have been labelled as 左膠 *zogaau* ("leftards"),⁵ an offensive slang term for people who credulously act in the name of leftism⁶ and "are liberal but useless at protecting local interests" (H. Cheung). Some rather progressive locals take aim at their musical experiences during the Umbrella Movement, claiming that the "failure" of the Occupy was the result of the use of nonviolent methods. Collective singing takes much of the blame, being considered merely a beguiling and narcissistic musical act in lieu of a political act. Coming under attack most frequently is the Cantopop song 海闊天空 "Boundless Oceans Vast Skies," a tune habitually and collectively sung in local protests that has become a musical symbol signifying a political

⁴ This event is held annually on June 4 by the Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements of China. It is one of the major regular pro-democracy assemblies in Hong Kong. During the vigil, participants mourn the victims of the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre, mainly through collective singing or collective silence in order to pay tribute to the Tiananmen protesters.

⁵ The pronunciation of the Chinese word "膠" (literally meaning "plastic," read as "gaau1") in Cantonese is close to a Cantonese vulgar word "鳩" (literally meaning "penis," read as "gau1"). The latter word is often used among locals in quarrels or expressions of anger. In such situations, the vulgar word usually means "contemptible" or "foolish" when it follows another word "蠢" (literally meaning "foolish," read as "ngong6") and becomes the vulgar phrase "蠢鳩." The word "膠" is often used to replace "鳩" or even the whole term "蠢鳩" when people do not want to use the vulgar term and prefer using a milder substitute to criticize a person.

⁶ "Left-wing" in Hong Kong politics consists of political parties or activists occupying different positions on a continuum of varying political tendencies. For instance, Demosistō, a new political party formed by Umbrella Movement activists including Agnes Chow, Nathan Law, Joshua Wong and others, is a left-leaning party.

ideal of freedom.⁷ These critics even use part of the lyrics (今天我“Today, I ...”) from the song to deride collective singing and highlight its ineffectiveness. Examples of such may be found in a wide range of online posts (e.g. KW Wong).

The connection between music and politics has been discussed by local progressive voices, especially in their criticism of musical performances in protest. An Adornian perspective on protest music can further contribute to such discussion. For some progressive protesters, music and nonviolent actions are inevitably artefacts by which people are injudiciously deceived, and which result in little more than a collaboration with the socio-political status quo, given that music is too removed from reality to generate political change. This opinion was especially popular during the weeks around the 27th anniversary of the ritualistic annual June 4 vigil in 2016.⁸ Should we thus come to the conclusion that musical performances in political rituals, especially tunes that are popular or renowned in protests, solely bring about *false consciousness* and lead us to evade dealing with actual political predicaments or the cacophony of social reality? In the words of Adorno, does such music betray the “obligation of music in society” (Bowman 305; Adorno)?⁹ What is the role of music in Hong Kong protests and why is there a tension regarding the appropriateness and usefulness of protest music amidst the changing socio-political climate? Lee and Chan, drawing from the words of Myra Marx Ferree and others, argue that “existing cultural norms and discursive codes in a society would also constrain which arguments about movements are more or less likely to be accepted by the general public” (Lee and Chan 66; Ferree et al.). The discourse surrounding large-scale pro-democracy protests and local music also has an impact on which arguments and perceptions of music’s role in protests are accepted by the Hong Kong public. As such, to answer the questions raised here, we have to first position this tension within the discursive construction of local music. In other words, we are to study the tension between the two major public

⁷ “Boundless Oceans Vast Skies” is a song by Beyond, a popular local band in the 90s, and was released in 1993 by Warner Music (Hong Kong). Tragically, the vocalist of the band, Wong Ka-kui, passed away in an accident during a television show in Japan two months after the song was released at the height of the band’s popularity. The song became Beyond’s very last hit, and so was especially well received among locals. The band and the song both represent the golden era of popular culture and economy in 1990s Hong Kong.

⁸ The ritualistic June 4 vigil in Victoria Park, which always consists of protest songs, repetitive slogan-chanting, and a series of ritual practices, is actively challenged by some progressive protesters, who even jeer at these vigil participants. For instance, several local progressive activists attempted to storm the main stage of the commemorative vigil in 2016 (Tong).

⁹ In Bowman’s words, Adorno believes that “truly great music has a fundamental social obligation to advance human consciousness and thereby social progress” (Bowman 305).

discourses on the social aesthetics of music in Hong Kong: (1) music as a vehicle for political change, and (2) music as entertainment.

In Hong Kong and the Sinophone world, music has played a notable role as a vehicle for political change since the 1980s. In Hong Kong, political messages are often expressed through Cantonese lyrics in the style of mainstream Cantopop. Joanna Lee reveals the connection between some Cantopop songs and the changing political context in Hong Kong (129). Lee points out that there were an increasing number of political Cantopop songs in response to the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre, reflecting both a patriotic fervor on the one hand and a sense of anxiety towards the approaching Handover in 1997 on the other (132–33). The contemporary singers' engagement in political musical performances drew a huge amount of financial support from locals and overseas diaspora who wished to assist the student protesters in Beijing (132).¹⁰ However, as a result of the changing socio-economic situation, Cantopop became rather politically neutral after 1997. Even so, the notion of music as a vehicle for political change has been upheld by a small number of local singers. These performers are still enthusiastic about producing protest songs or politically sensitive Cantopop, though they have encountered more constraints in recent years. During the Umbrella Movement, Anthony Wong Yiu-ming 黃耀明, Denise Ho Wan-see 何韻詩 and local songwriter Pan Lo Hiu-pan 羅曉彬 produced a political Cantopop song entitled “Hold Up the Umbrellas” 撐起雨傘, which is widely considered the “theme song” of the movement. However, some of these singers (including Denise Ho, whose mentor was Anita Mui Yim-fong 梅艷芳, an 80s Cantopop diva who took a prominent role in the advocacy rallies in 1989) are criticized by some local progressive activists online. This criticism is part of an increasing popularity surrounding the social discourse of music as entertainment, a discourse full of political disenchantment reinforced by the fact that Cantopop, as a mainstream style, is becoming more detached from contemporary local society. Advocacy singers were very much welcomed in 1989, but since 2014 they have been met with accusations of being “leftards” by some voices. In reality, however, the music of these local singers has been censored not only in mainland China but also in Hong Kong since the Umbrella Movement. These occurrences stand in contrast to the oppositional discursive phenomenon of local music as merely a form of entertainment. The tension between the two discourses surrounding music in Hong Kong is indeed intensifying.

Another criticism of the appropriateness and usefulness of music in generating political change in protests concerns the moral policing of the protest space. The mass performance of peace and nonviolence via each participant's efforts to be self-disciplinary is a key feature and

¹⁰ For instance, an advocacy concert titled *All for Freedom* that was held on May 27, 1989 collected 12 million Hong Kong dollars in donations.

method of nonviolent protests. Gene Sharp suggests that resisters must “stand together” to maintain “nonviolent discipline, internal solidarity, and morale, and to continue the struggle” (97) when performing nonviolent mass action for political purposes. For Mahatma Gandhi, nonviolent action such as mass civil disobedience “can only be tried in a calm atmosphere” and protesters have to be “disciplined soldiers and all the better for being unarmed” (Gandhi 72–73). The Gandhian approach reveals the pivotal role of self-discipline in creating a unified, controlled and, most importantly, nonviolent collective force to combat the power of opponents. Hong Kong protesters embody the notion of self-discipline as an appropriate and useful tool in protests. Lee and Chan explain how the media and pro-democracy politicians created a public discourse about local protests in this respect. In local protests such as the July 1 rally, the protesters were reported to be “rational” and to consist of “high quality” people “who disapprove of the government but love the city” (73). To many, it appeared that self-regulation and nonviolent discipline was a notable feature of the Umbrella Movement. For instance, some protesters set up recycling facilities in the protest space to create a better environment; meanwhile, a great deal of bottled water, masks, gloves and umbrellas (for physical protection from tear gas released by police to disperse occupiers) were voluntarily donated to the protest sites. These disciplinary acts reinforced the nonviolent discourse and moral economy in turn. Local and foreign news outlets praised Hongkongers for protesting with discipline and peace.

At the same time, however, some dissenters criticized musical performances at the protest sites. Those embodying the idea the discourse of “music as entertainment” expressed concern that protesters may suffer attacks from political opponents if immersed in a sense of self-contentment during collective singing. The concern was that opponents and police could enter the protest sites, occupy them and bring the protests to an end if protesters were not “on standby.” More importantly, there was some criticism of non-confrontational local protests generally. Some news articles described large-scale democracy protests in 2004 and 2005 as “carnivals,” which became another useful way for political opponents to “trivialise the call for democracy” (Lee and Chan 81). As such, some Umbrella Movement protesters took these comments particularly seriously and took extra care to prevent the protest from being derided as carnival-like¹¹—some even made “No Music” signs and regulated others within the protest space.

¹¹ “Carnival” here does not refer to Bakhtin’s notion of the political potential of the “carnavalesque.” It is a neutral word reflecting the protesters’ thoughts.

The Political Role of “Nonsensical” Collective Singing in the Umbrella Movement

The act of collective singing was a typical event in Hong Kong’s Umbrella Movement. In collective singing, participants not only understand the lyrics as a textual representation of their political beliefs or particular cultural ideas, but also recognize the audible presence as a cultural representation of a dissonant voice in a particular culture. Jeneve R. Brooks addresses the affective reaction to collective singing in social movements arguing that “[t]he tradition of collective singing provide[s] them [musicians and activists] much-needed emotional cohesion and strength” (219). As such, music becomes an agent of the collective consciousness; that is, singing functions as a way for one to acknowledge oneself as part of the resistant community. Collective singing in protests is not only a performative act per se, or an audible representation of certain ideologies—it is also an act that allows for different forms of participation, including singing together, listening to collective singing while one individually contemplates or thinks about the social context, participating in the music through tapping one’s hands or other bodily movements, and so on. That is to say, we are not automata that simply “sound together” to display a togetherness. This is because the utterance (or non-utterance) of slogans or songs is a cognitive process that involves the understanding of both the text and context. This is perhaps especially the case when the sonic act is unexpected or ironic—in such moments, dissenters have to recontextualize the sound with their current existence as physical bodies in the protest space. In other words, they must ruminate on their roles and actions as political participants. There are a number of historical references to the use of irony and humor as metaphor and resistance. For instance, the Dada Movement and the “trickster” trope in Afro-American cultural history are typical examples of how the paradoxical nature of a situation can be understood by a witty grasp of particular meanings shaped by the cultural context. In the Umbrella Movement, protesters similarly offered new meanings to the renowned birthday ditty.

On October 6, 2014, the ninth day of the Umbrella Movement,¹² a video clip of a scene in the protest went viral online (Music4xx, “Origin of Singing Birthday Song in Mong Kok”). The video was taken in an occupied street in Mong Kok. In the video, the scene begins with two

¹² The Umbrella Movement entered a new stage after the first few days. Starting from October 2, 2014, the fifth day of the movement, anti-occupy activists and pro-Beijing protesters launched a “Blue Ribbon Campaign” to support police action to end the protest (Ng, *Umbrellas in Bloom* 309). From that day onward, there were an increasing number of quarrels and violent attacks in the occupied sites. Some masked attackers, who some believe were actually triad members, coordinated with “Blue Ribbon” protesters to physically attack pro-democracy protesters and journalists so as to disrupt the peaceful demonstration (131–32).

counter-protesters (“Blue Ribbon” protesters) shouting at the occupiers (“Yellow Ribbon” protesters) about the inconvenience created by street occupation. All of a sudden, the pre-recorded version of “Happy Birthday to You” is played by accident through an electronic megaphone by a protester who originally grabbed the loudspeaker to call for calm.¹³ After this happens, the crowd goes quiet and looks around to see what had happened for a moment before bursting into an 18-second applause. The crowd then joins in with the music spontaneously, singing the Cantonese lyrics of the birthday ditty until the counter-protesters leave the area. Following this event, pro-democracy protesters would sing Cantonese or English versions of “Happy Birthday to You” to ease tensions and maintain the protest’s nonviolent nature whenever anti-occupy protesters appeared. The use of the song connotes a sense of humor as well as the idea of “nonsense.” But why is such nonsense so humorous? Why is this sort of irony so effective in easing tension? I suggest that this is because, firstly, the song is celebratory in nature, and secondly, because the musical event exemplifies the process of transforming a contradiction between the nature of a celebration and that of a protest into a meaningful political experience. This musical event questions the binary nature of the context, thus responding to the dichotomy marking the public discourses on music in local protests.

Many people share a certain kind of listening experience of “Happy Birthday to You” from childhood—that is, they come to understand the song in a similar way—resulting in mutual expectations of when and where the song should be sung and heard. However, since the Umbrella Movement was a protest site, these expectations were short-circuited. “Happy Birthday to You,” a tune which invites celebratory, embodied behavior such as clapping and singing, seems quite incompatible with a protest site. As an expression of dissatisfaction with authorities that normally takes place in a public space, a protest is a display of seriousness, disappointment and anger, a stark contrast to a birthday gathering. In the context of a protest, the time and space that the birthday ditty plays a role in is different from the one in which its usual sense is harbored. This mismatch of representation and context created confusion among pro-democracy protesters and counter-protesters when they first heard the tune. On the one hand, it brought a lot of laughter to occupiers and online supporters; on the other, it made counter-protesters feel embarrassed or unsure of how to respond (thus they either fell silent or left the occupied area).

¹³ Some megaphone designs allow for preset, pre-recorded music, usually electronic high-pitched versions of renowned tunes such as “Happy Birthday to You,” “Mary Had a Little Lamb,” and Beethoven’s *Für Elise*. The preset music can be played when the user presses one of the two buttons near the mouthpiece (the user’s voice can be amplified by pressing the other).

This nonsensical and somehow ludicrous situation first occurred when the protest entered a new stage. During this time, there was actually a lack of progress in achieving the initial political goals of the movement. There was a need for relaxing and humorous activities in the occupied space at that point to ease the tediousness and tension and to encourage protesters to continue the occupation. Nevertheless, the maxim of the Umbrella Movement, “Don’t forget the original intention” 勿忘初衷 *matmong cocung*, printed on flyers and appearing all over the protest space, had been internalized by dissenters as a durable and sacred principle of the demonstration. The zeal for genuine universal suffrage and the nonviolent discipline of this movement was still thriving. As a result, whenever there was a tense situation that had the potential to turn violent in the occupied area, laughter and playful, nonsensical performances of “Happy Birthday to You” proved to constructively ease tension. These rather light-hearted activities, however, did not devastate the solemnity of the nonviolent protest. When the birthday song was performed as a nonviolent political act with defensive purposes, it was immune to the public discourse of music as entertainment or the worry that the protest would become a carnival. In this regard, the ironic musical act became an effective response to the counter-protesters, perfect for turning negative situations into positive ones and for fulfilling the contextual need for a peaceful atmosphere in the nonviolent demonstration. Not only was this act nonviolent, but it also allowed occupiers to meet their short-term political goals—that is, to tune out irritating political opponents and to defend the occupied territory without aggression. In this regard, the humorous nonviolent tactic of singing the birthday ditty effectively led to the accomplishment of the protesters’ strategic goals and undermined conflicts.

Further Recontextualization of the Ironic Musical Act

The impression of nonsense in the encounter with “Happy Birthday to You” is also an aesthetic judgement among internet users. Comments that referred to the singing of the song as 錯有錯著 *cojaucozoek* “making a correct mistake,” as well as “laugh out loud” icons, dominated related discussions in online forums and the blogosphere (Kyunzinglitwanzitung). This shows how many protest supporters tried to make sense of the contextual incongruence even though they were not out on the streets.

In protest sites, a nonsensical soundscape changes the power relationship between two opposing political forces. In the Umbrella Movement, Yellow Ribbon protesters legitimated such singing and transformed the music into a communal and political act through collective singing. When the act was performed, an auditory hierarchy was constructed: pro-democracy protesters took on the role of singing

the song, while counter-protesters took on the role of “receiving” the song. Participants who sang the song together created a virtual space in which only they grasped the political intention of the recontextualization of the tune, making use of the new meaning through singing, listening and positioning their bodies in opposition to the counter-protesters. The line “happy birthday” was sung to a specific “you”—the irritating Blue Ribbon protesters. This musical “dedication” also applies to the performance of the ditty’s Cantonese version: The Yellow Ribbon protesters “wish” (祝 *zuk*) the specific “you” (您 *nei*) a “happy birthday” (生日快樂 *sang jat faai lok*).¹⁴ Of course, the lyrics “happy birthday” no longer refer to their textual meaning; they instead point to a symbolic meaning with regard to the action performed in the protest sites. Only pro-democracy protesters could be a part of the auditory collective, which immediately engendered communal power; only they could form the performative unity to otherize their opposition (that is, the counter-protesters).

For the Yellow Ribbon protesters, this nonsensical act is a playful one; it is also a kind of successful joke that functions as political action. Ted Cohen notes that there are two essential parts to a successful joke: (1) getting the joke, i.e., having a cognitive grasp of the emotional expression, which involves understanding the premises and references of the joke; and (2) finding it funny, i.e., having an affective (emotional) response to the joke (31–32). Majken Jul Sørensen believes that humor “has relations to both cognitive processes, emotions within the individual, interpersonal relations in small groups as well as broader social relations in our societies” (46). The shared cognitive grasp and affective responses to the nonsensical musical act among pro-democracy protesters therefore connects individuals, making participants aware of their united identity as Yellow Ribbon protesters who should act nonviolently. The nonsensical birthday song created a political public (or a new “musical public”) as the musical performance unfolded in time, leading to changes in the political events in the protest spaces and even reducing conflict between pro-democracy protesters and police officers. For instance, one Blue Ribbon protester in the Mong Kok occupied area made a complaint to a nearby police officer: “They [pro-democracy protesters] sing ‘Happy Birthday to You’ to *insult* me!” (“Anti-Occupy Protester”). This shows that when the counter-protesters recognized the new meaning of the nonsensical singing, they identified themselves as being in a powerless role in the auditory hierarchy brought about by the musical performance. That is why that particular counter-protester reported his experience of “suffering” to the police officer: drawing on the authoritative role that the police officer played in the protest and in social reality in a bid to

¹⁴ The lyrics of the Cantonese version of “Happy Birthday to You” are direct translations from the original English lyrics.

regain power. However, as the police officer was amused by the humorous situation brought about by the celebratory nature of the birthday song and its nonsensical occurrence, he responded to the Blue Ribbon protester in a similarly casual manner (“Anti-Occupy Protester”):

| | |
|------------------------|--|
| Police officer: | Do you know them? |
| Blue Ribbon protester: | No. |
| Police officer: | If you don't know them, there is no surprise if they remember your birthday incorrectly! |

The nonsensical and humorous nature of “Happy Birthday to You” performances in the protest concealed the act’s power as a nonviolent weapon that could undermine the power of both the Blue Ribbon protesters and the authorities. Later, more nonsensical tunes were sung for the same purpose, including “To Wish for a Happy Birthday” (祝壽歌 *Zuksaugo*), “It’s a Small World” (世界真細小 *Saigai zan Saisiu*), and a Buddhist chant 喃嚨阿彌陀佛 “*Namo Amitufo*,” among others. All of these songs have perfectly irrelevant lyrics in the context of a political demonstration. Such irrelevance, again, magnifies the irony and jest of the musical act, which leads to an amusing shift in the power relationship. In the protest, “*Namo Amitufo*” was sung to the police front lines when the police force in Mong Kok tried to clear the occupation on October 19 by creating human-chain boundaries, pushing protesters back onto the pedestrian path and urging them to disperse and leave by force (Music4xx, “*Namo Amitufo*”). The behavior of the front line police officers who were facing towards the sound source of “*Namo Amitufo*” became awkward. For instance, a police officer suddenly took a drink of water while another officer uncomfortably changed the position of his body many times. It seems that the police officers wanted to ignore the musical sound aimed at them as they recognized themselves being otherized by the musical act. However, they could not escape from the soundscape and the position they were in, and thus had to face the situation head on. This extended use of recontextualized songs shows that protesters were conscious of the difference between the embodied experience and the new sonic experience created by singing irrelevant tunes. The nonsensical play and unequal auditory hierarchy in this situation reaffirmed each protester’s identity as part of the pro-democracy community. Here, politicization turned the unexpected musical pieces into nonviolent weapons crafted through a process of localization in various occupied sites. In this way, music became a force propelling communal and political action.

Derridean Deconstruction: When “Happy Birthday to You” Meets “*Mouleitau*”

I have so far explained how the contextual factors in protest spaces shape our understanding of nonsensical musical sound and how we can make new sense of this nonsensical sound through recontextualization. Now we can connect the humorous political acts under discussion to local culture, exploring how the musical act of singing “Happy Birthday to You” is a symbolic practice that entails a reference to the cultural “absence.” Here, I am referring to the idea of Derridean deconstruction. Derrida points out that the understanding of symbolic practice (that is, culture in its “presence”) always necessitates a reference to culture in its “absence”; difference always involves *différance*, which implies deferral (1–28). A social actor’s interpretation of symbols always entails an implied semiotic text (that is, it references the absent cultural background). In other words, we have to consider the larger cultural context to fully understand the nonsensical singing of the birthday ditty in the Umbrella Movement.

The nonsensical musical act of “Happy Birthday to You” appeared unexpectedly. Its celebratory nature and our embedded thoughts about the tune made its existence in the protest unusual and ironic. This irony, however, perfectly matches a concept in local culture—*mouleitau*, literally meaning “nonsense.” A comment on the original YouTube video of this event mentions nonsense in relation to Stephen Chow’s movies: “Hongkongers got the essence [of localism] from Master Sing [Stephen Chow]” (港人深得星爺真傳) (Music4xx, “Origin of Singing Birthday Song in Mong Kok”). Nonsense narratives or the idea of *mouleitau* is a signature of Chow’s comedies. *Mouleitau* was originally a Cantonese slang from Fujian Province that referred to a person doing something that has its own logic but that outsiders find difficult to understand (N.-C. Chow 20). In its current usage, *mouleitau* usually takes on a deeper meaning. It touches upon the essence of objects in a playful manner, an idea which corresponds to the nonsensical nature of “Happy Birthday to You” in the protest site. This has some parallels to the “signifyin’” oral practice and the “trickster” trope in Afro-American cultural history. Signifyin’ is a form of wordplay and verbal strategy that harkens back to African slavery in America, while the trickster is an archetype in African folklore and mythology who utters signifyin’ words. Afro-American slaves internalized the values entailed in the slave owners’ language and made a different version, making use of black vernacular with words that meant different things among the black community. The tradition provided a narrative world “where reality is inverted, and double meanings abound” (Smith 180). Members of the Afro-American culture were able to achieve a form of psychological power through “cunning and deceit,” allowing the slave to identify with “the antics of the folk hero [the trickster figure]” (Smith 180). Signifyin’ is also an incarnation of post-structuralist theory—take, for instance,

the critiques of Saussure offered by Jacques Derrida's coinage of *différance* (Warren 224–25). For *mouleitou*, people cannot grasp the essence of the act if they are not situated in a relevant occurrence or cannot link the situated experience to *mouleitou* culture, i.e. to the pre-existing cultural background that was not obviously seen in the nonviolent Umbrella Movement (since the casual and fun nature of related acts was normally discouraged in the occupied sites as a matter of self-discipline). In such situations, *mouleitou* acts may have been preemptively considered nonsensical when they were first performed in the protest if they were not further recontextualized immediately.

Stephen Chow's *mouleitou* movies inspired a wave of *mouleitou* culture among various media outlets in 1990s Hong Kong. Cheung Yin defines *mouleitou* in Chow's comedies as exhibiting three characteristics: (1) Unique space (usually a transcendental setting—a cross-space of the past, present and future in the narrative—with bizarre characters and props); (2) Exaggerated, repetitive or nonsensical language that does nothing to contribute to the narrative flow, but that provides much laughter; and (3) Exaggerated bodily performances and appearances amidst a bizarre plot (N.-C. Chow 20–21; Y. Cheung 35–41). *Mouleitou* culture is one of the most significant features of local culture and often reflects an important element of Hong Kong identity. As Cheung Yin argues, the Handover in 1997 caused worry among Hongkongers concerned about the changing political environment. As such, a sense of individuality increased among locals since they were less willing to believe in tradition and the authorities. Cultural scholar Tam Ah-ming responds to Cheung's comments by saying that *mouleitou* culture in local media outlets challenges the traditional and authoritative grand narrative of the “under the lion rock spirit”—that is, the notion that Hongkongers should be hardworking and conform to authorities and social regulations—by means of its humorous nature and reflection of localism (N.-C. Chow 20–21). *Mouleitou* culture remains popular nowadays among local popular media and youngsters. For instance, the local satirical weekly magazine *100Most*, which features satirical and sometimes irrelevant or nonsensical graphics and jokes about current local issues, is one of the most famous and popular forms of media in contemporary Hong Kong (Yau). Vivienne Chow quotes Anthony Fung's argument on the relationship between *100Most's* satirical content and the Hongkonger identity. Such content and its online social platform that “voice[s] young people's frustrations and discontent [with social and political predicaments]” may be seen as conducive to the fortification of Hong Kong's cultural identity (V. Chow).

The irony of “Happy Birthday to You” is comparable to the bizarre plots in *mouleitou* films. Social actors played an idiosyncratic role in performing *mouleitou* behaviors in the protest—they seemed to perform nonsensical acts, but in fact these acts had deeper meaning.

Occupiers made sense of the “click” they experienced when they originally came to understand the nonsensical musical act by turning it into a communal and political act. Pro-democracy protesters formed a unity—a musical public—through practices such as collective music-making and by performing homogeneous auditory roles, finally “attacking” political opponents with this nonviolent sonic weapon. The political humor reflected in these acts connotes a local understanding of humor through the performance of real *mouleitau* acts in the protest, reinforcing the sense of localness in the Umbrella Movement. It was performed in a playful manner and generated laughter on the one hand, yet was serious in its criticism of political opponents on the other. In the case of “Happy Birthday to You” and other nonsensical songs, the singing performance is a nonviolent political weapon in the protest space yet also reflects the embedded cultural knowledge of *mouleitau* as a cultural act.

Closing Remarks

The act of singing “Happy Birthday to You” and other unexpected songs in the Umbrella Movement served to enact communal and political action against the opposition. These nonsensical acts, which adapted the embedded cultural concept of *mouleitau*, engendered direct and immediate interactions between the two camps. Political opposition could not in fact ignore the nonsensical musical acts because protesters were situated highly in the auditory hierarchy brought about by the musical performance. The ironic musical act became a nonviolent weapon that undermined the social and political power of the opposing camp within the specific context. Moreover, the nonsensical musical act and its humorous effects refer to everyday humor in local culture, which makes the political humor even more meaningful locally. The nonsensical musical act does not only exist as a communal and political act but also as a cultural act. The essence of localness underpins the recontextualized music.

Citizens who understood or who participated in the nonsensical musical acts during the Umbrella Movement learned a new sense of music as a nonviolent weapon. On December 12, 2014, the third-to-last day of the movement, thousands of protesters assembled in shopping areas and previously-occupied-zones in Causeway Bay and Mong Kok as 鳩鳴 *gouwu* shoppers¹⁵ and Christmas carollers. *Gouwu* shoppers are “a form of flash mobs in which participants pretend to be shoppers and visit busy shopping areas in large numbers to overwhelm law

¹⁵ The term “*gouwu*” is a Cantonese vulgar term referring to “disordered or nonsensical yelling” (亂咁噏 *lyun gam ngaai*). It also has a satirical and stereotypical meaning describing the chaotic scenes and “uncivilized” behavior of some Chinese visitors when they travel and shop in Hong Kong.

enforcement [which aimed to clear the occupied sites] as an act of defiance” (Ng, *Umbrellas in Bloom* 340). When “shopping,” *gouwu* shoppers sing any kind of music to protest against the heavy police presence. A *gouwu* shopper mentioned to me during the protest that such singing was not a ritual, though the song he sang, “Boundless Oceans Vast Skies,” might be considered one of the “ritualized” songs of local protests. He stated that “the singing is not a ritual that only celebrates positivity and narcissistic acts such as clapping. It is an *act* that is inevitably connected to every bodily movement and political action in protest.” Indeed, spontaneous musical acts such as these are now not only social performances that unite individuals as members of the pro-democracy community in Hong Kong—they also naturally play a role in strategic nonviolent action.

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