

**Examine the ways in which visual/material practices have been mobilized in political expression using ethnographic examples.**

This essay argues that visual and material practices are effective tools in the portrayal of political expression. Drawing on ethnographic examples of the 2014 Sewol ferry disaster and subsequent protests in South Korea, and the 2014 Umbrella protests and following 2019 Anti-ELAB protests in Hong Kong, this essay highlights the usage of yellow ribbons to express dissatisfaction against respective governments and establish an anti-governmental identity. The portrayal of events through visual media and the symbolism behind yellow (and by extension, coloured) ribbons call towards a production and maintenance of collective memory which could then be “harnessed for political dissent” through their mass distribution (of media and material objects) (Sarfati and Chung, 2018, p. 582). Within these ethnographic examples, the visual and material practices have called for the expression of political opinions through attitudes of irreconcilability, where one (or a group) refuses to perform grand gestures of forgiveness (Mookherjee, 2022), and reattribution, where guilt and culpability is reassigned to different actors through appealing to subjective and supposedly universal emotions that actively change “meanings of justice through sentimentalized discourses” (Clarke, 2019, p. 20).

On the 16<sup>th</sup> of April, 2014, the Sewol ferry sank en route from Incheon to Jeju Island in South Korea, causing 304 deaths, among which were 250 high school students from Ansan city. Many of the deceased had obeyed the request by the ship captain to stay put even when the ferry was sinking, and thus perished in the disaster; many survivors did not follow the request and tried to escape. (BBC, 2014a) The incident incited widespread reaction within the country: anger at the ship captain’s negligent orders and abandonment of the ship while the passengers drowned (Park, 2014), as well as criticism against the ferry operators for ignoring safety regulations and colluding with regulation officials to falsify safety documents, and the government for ineffectual rescue and the lax regulatory environment that contributed to safety violations during the Sewol ferry trip (Jenkins, 2014). Anger against the government grew as the then-President Park Geun-hye as her government valued preserving their reputation over saving the victims:

initial misleading reports about the ferry sinking squandered precious rescue time, leading to a disorganized and ineffective response team. When the Park government was questioned and investigations into the disaster were demanded, the government instead went after their critics, attempting to ban the symbols of protest (Sarfati, 2019, p. 286) and adding creative professionals who criticized Park's handling of the Sewol disaster to a blacklist (Kim, 2017, p. 10). Park and her government were criticised for a lack of accountability.

In demonstrations related to the Sewol ferry, yellow ribbons came into circulation as a symbol of protest. Casualties of the ferry sinking were “perceived as innocent victims of larger forces” who were sent to an untimely death by uncaring corporations and officials, a view further bolstered by the fact that most of the casualties were teenagers; wearing or using a yellow ribbon thus marked an individual as a “general humanist” who grieved the loss of innocent lives. As grief turned into rage against the government, using the yellow ribbon also became a political expression (Sarfati and Chung, 2018, p. 573): yellow became seen in commemoration and protest sites, most notably at Gwanghwamun Square where Sewol ferry commemoration booths were set up for a few months after the ferry sinking, and two years later during the protests against President Park Geun-hye that demanded her stepping down from the presidency. Sarfati and Chung (2018, p. 577) notes the transformation of the yellow ribbon from a symbol of mourning and loss to one of political dissent and criticism against the government: two weeks after the sinking, when a major broadcasting agency stated that the number of casualties in the ferry disaster was not significant compared to the yearly number of car crash victims, parents of the deceased high school students marched to the offices of the broadcasting agency, then to the Blue House (the then-official residence of the Korean president) to express their anger. A striking visual image was created as the parent “sat on the ground in front of the gate [of the Blue House], hugging their dead children’s photographs, some of them folding pieces of yellow paper into boats”. On the same day, students from Ansan also marched with yellow signs to condemn the broadcasting agency. Thus yellow became associated with criticisms of the Park government, and “became iconic, space-defining artefacts, delineating protest sites and personal identities” (Sarfati, 2019, p. 300). During President Park’s political scandal two years later, protest rallies in Seoul strongly featured the usage of yellow objects (signs and ribbons); yellow had fully taken on the political

expression of dissent against the Park government and the demand for a new leader. Park Geun-hye was impeached, and when Moon Jae-in (from the opposition political party) won the presidential election, he was seen greeting his supporters with a yellow ribbon pinned to his suit – visually expressing support for the yellow ribbon cause (Kim, 2017, p. 3).

The yellow ribbon, through its utilization in protests and commemoration activities, is imbued with collective memories of melancholy at the loss of young lives in the Sewol ferry disaster, as well as anger and frustration at the then-Korean government over the lack of transparency and corruption in the government. The significance of the yellow ribbon is constructed through discourses of commemoration and protest, and the usage of visual representations creates “a common visual language” that expresses implicit and explicit social, cultural and emotional meanings (Sarfati and Chung, 2018, pp. 567-568).

The protests in Hong Kong were about the objection to restrictive policies and/or policies with significant loopholes which could be used to push for undemocratic measures, proposed by the Hong Kong government in conjunction with the Chinese Communist Party. The 2014 Umbrella protests were a response to the proposal of (undemocratic) reforms to the electoral system which would allow the Chinese government to pre-screen candidates for the Chief Executive of Hong Kong, while the 2019 protests responded to a proposed amendment to an extradition law, which led to fears of opening up the Hong Kong judicial system to Chinese law, eroding the judicial integrity of Hong Kong’s legal system (thus the protests were called the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill (Anti-ELAB) Movement).

In the 2014 Umbrella protests, the colours ‘yellow’ and ‘blue’ have become a shorthand for political allegiances. ‘Yellow’, or the yellow ribbon, stood for a pro-democracy stance and a demand for universal suffrage; while ‘blue’ or the ‘blue ribbon’ symbolized a general pro-establishment and pro-governmental stance and derives from the blue on the uniforms of law enforcement officials. (Coleman, 2014) One’s political stance could be known simply by the

invocation of the coloured ribbons: when one claims that they support (or ‘are’) a ‘yellow ribbon’ or a ‘blue ribbon’, they invoke the meanings behind these coloured ribbons and announce their allegiance to their respective political faction, and thus (loosely) declare their identity as a pro-democrat or a pro-government person. The ‘Umbrellas’ of the Umbrella protests are a reference to yellow umbrellas, umbrellas being passive resistance symbols (and tools to block the police’s pepper spray and teargas) and yellow invoking the pro-democratic stance and identity.

In the following 2019 Anti-ELAB protests, the phrases ‘yellow ribbon’ and ‘blue ribbon’ were still invoked as a shorthand for political expression, though the significance lay more with the implications of colours and less with actual coloured ribbons. As the protests developed, political expression and identity evolved into ‘national’ or state identity. Ever since the 1997 Handover, residents in Hong Kong have always struggled with their identity as a former colony of the UK: an identity rather distinct from the rest of China, even though the city’s identity was technically subsumed under the Chinese identity. Not quite Chinese enough to be Chinese, but not quite ‘foreign’ enough to completely reject the Chinese identity with ease. At times residents would define themselves as exclusively Chinese, or exclusively a Hongkonger, or a combination of both – Hong Kong Chinese. In relation to the 2019 protests, pro-establishment ‘blue ribbons’ became increasingly associated with support for not just the Hong Kong government or police force but with the Chinese government (and thus the Chinese Communist Party), while pro-democratic ‘yellow ribbons’ sought distance from a Chinese identity and came to define themselves exclusively as ‘Hongkonger’. The visual practice of coloured ribbons, then, came to represent both political inclination and ‘national’ identity.

The political connotations of yellow and blue extended to an economic boycott activity called the ‘Yellow Economic Circle’ where the pro-democracy faction classified businesses according to their support or opposition to the protests: ‘yellow’ businesses supported the protests and thus ‘yellow ribbon’ protestors were encouraged to shop at them, while (usually pro-establishment) ‘blue’ businesses were those voicing opposition to the Anti-ELAB protests and they faced subsequent boycotts from pro-democracy supporters. (The Guardian, 2020; Li and Whitworth

2022) Pro-establishment businesses were further classified into ‘blue’ (opposing the protests), ‘red’ (affiliated with the Chinese Communist Party), and ‘black’ (owned by the Chinese Communist Party) businesses, and, whenever protests evolved into violence against businesses and brick-and-mortar stores, became targets of vandalism. (BBC, 2019a) By infusing political meaning into colours and mobilizing them in political discourses and actions of dissent or support, the usage of colour becomes a powerful visual practice in political expression during the protests.

Another visual practice in the Hong Kong protests was the construction of Lennon Walls (in context of the protest movements). Also originating in the 2014 Umbrella protests, pro-democracy protestors wrote down words of encouragement relating to reasons to keep protesting on sticky notes, then attached these notes to banners which would then be hung in public, visible places such as pedestrian footbridges or underground subway stations. (The Guardian, 2019) Multicoloured sticky notes, interspersed with printed protest material (lexical or photographic) created a collaborative protest art and was a strong visual reminder of demands for democracy and an expression of defiance against the government. Lennon walls, along with other forms of protest artwork, (Khong, 2019), music, (BBC, 2019b), and films and documentaries (Wong 2022) act as tools to spread awareness of the events occurring during the protests, and offers a pro-democratic perspective to such events which would otherwise be covered by pro-establishment media (which tended to be more mainstream than pro-democracy media). These material practices not only allowed pro-democratic factions to express their political opinion, but also forms a distinctive pro-democratic cultural standpoint that further differentiates their identity from pro-establishment factions, and reflects ways in which the protest movements perceived themselves and how protestors perceived their sense of self (Wan, 2017, pp. 179-180).

In conclusion, visual practices, and the material practices associated with visual representations, are very effective tools in political expression. This essay primarily draws on examples of political dissent and/or opposition against their respective governments, and examines how the

visual/material practice of a yellow ribbon has been used to symbolise said dissent and/or opposition.

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