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Author	Wen-chi Li
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Can the Young Adults Speak? Poetry from the Sunflower and Umbrella Movements

Wen-chi Li
University of Zurich

This article explores political aspirations of young adults of Taipei and Hong Kong by analysing the poems written during the Sunflower Movement and the Umbrella Movement. Poetry is a vehicle to convey ideas to the audience. Reading these poems from Taipei and Hong Kong, one can notice several distinctive characteristics. First, the poets have established a broad dichotomy: the upper and the lower, violence and resistance, eloquence and silence, lies and truth, and hypocrisy and morality. Second, poetry is a field for multiplicity. Focusing more on everyday practices, sometimes vulgar, filthy, and obscene, these poems correspond to Bakhtin's theory of carnival in which wordplay, mimicry, and irony open a space for renewal and rebirth. Additionally, Derrida's concept of dissemination can help to examine the linguistic slippage that indirectly subverts authority. After investigating protest poetry, the author asks if the young adults can speak. The youth's voices can definitely be heard when it comes to the concept of "the democracy to come". The "democracy to come," conceptualised by Derrida to replace the notion of the future, cannot be reduced to a simple idea, but remains unpredictable, so as to allow itself always to be full of possibilities.

Two Events

2014 was a year of commotion for the two East Asian cities of Taipei and Hong Kong. Taipei's young adults resolved to occupy the parliament on the 23rd of March, as they felt frustrated by the constant internal decisions and were unsatisfied with the Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement which was perceived to have passed in a non-transparent manner. They argued that this agreement, in liberalising the market with China and opening the gates to welcome Chinese investment, would not only damage the Taiwanese economy, causing shops to shut down and outflowing key technology, but would also hurt Taiwanese identity. One of the central protest figures, Lin Fei-Fan (林飛凡), declared, "we retake the parliament on behalf of the people," and other slogans of the protest included "My own country. Save it by myself" ("自己的國家自己救"; all translations in text are mine unless mentioned otherwise) as well as "When a dictatorship is a fact, revolution becomes a duty".

While the students were occupying the parliament, a florist donated sunflowers, which the students used to decorate the rostrum in the hall. These flowers caught the eyes of journalists and became an inspiration to name the movement. Later the sit-in became a well-organised and multi-coloured demonstration. The students not only strategised the protest struggle, but also held

seminars, reading groups, concerts, and spaces for creating art. As the fight lasted longer and the sit-in became increasingly fatigued, they could not avoid considering how to move ahead. On the 7th of April, the protesters decided to retreat from that space, and promised their movement would “blossom everywhere” (“遍地開花”) – a posture that aimed to cultivate the movement beyond the parliament, to Taipei city, and even further to the whole of Taiwan.

This event influenced students in Hong Kong, where the discontentment broke out due to a lack of genuine universal suffrage and an increasing encroachment of mainland Chinese influence (Ong). The framework of “one country, two systems,” proposed after the return to China in 1997, had been interpreted from Beijing’s own perspective. In recent years, Hong Kong has noticed the limitation of self-determination and civil liberties. In August 2014, Beijing affirmed that candidates for the Chief Executive would be nominated by an Election Committee of 1200 members, most of them widely considered to be pro-Beijing elites (“Hong Kong’s Democracy”). Hong Kong citizens had no other choice but to accept, which invalidated the idea of popular suffrage for the region (Nebhay). On the 26th of September, Hong Kongers organised a peaceful occupation of the Central district. Unlike the Sunflower Movement that assembled in a specific area, the students spread to many street corners throughout Causeway Bay, Admiralty, Mong Kok, Tsim Sha Tsui, and other districts. The response of the riot police, who deployed pepper spray and tear gas and made arrests, was condemned by human rights observers and foreign journalists. The images of protesters holding up umbrellas against police tear gas quickly spread in the media, thus spawning the name “Umbrella Movement.” However, their endeavours failed to change the political decisions. From November to December, the police started to disperse and arrest more protesters, and the occupied area was cordoned off. Yellow-coloured signs with the slogan “we will be back” were left in many places, expressing the soft resistance and will to cling to the possibility of democracy within the region (Hilgers).

Resistance in the Young Adults

To analyse the psyche of the young adults in the two cities, one should first review the previous research on the concept of resistance. The social movements that emphasise the dissatisfaction of the suppressed, the marginal, and the proletariat, and allow them access to revolt, might raise a new consciousness in other citizens of different areas. John Clammer points out that these social movements touch human existential situations such as hope, love, fear, suffering, and future vision, as well as confer the possibility of alternatives (245–246). “Social movements are of profound significance as generators of new forms of knowledge,” he states (249). He refers to movements in a wider sense, including the cultural achievement of prominent thinkers from sociology, psychiatry, philosophy, and liberal arts. Cultural movements do not so much solve the

problem as fulfil “the requirements of an expanded moral imagination” (251–256). In the contexts of Taipei and Hong Kong, social movements could begin in a cultural sense, generating new modes of knowing in the people, and changing the decision of each individual.

Noticing the dynamic creation within the Sunflower and Umbrella Movements, the art scholars Pei-yi Lu and Phoebe Wong analyse the ostensibly opposite statuses held by these individuals: the citizen-as-artist and the artist-as-citizen (48). By establishing a space with well-defined basic facilities, the dissidents turn the occupied parliament and street into a living space, to discuss how to achieve a better quality of politics. It becomes a domain for dialogue, discussion, and the exchange of ideas that “practices a possible future and creates more space for the future” (48). The participants create artistic work to express their views on something righteous and unrevealed. This practice claims thus: “I am here, I see it, I participate,” and then, “I am a witness and part of this movement” (49). More than this, the site becomes a “temporary gallery” for the artworks. It manifests “objects of resistance” in the case of the Sunflower Movement or offers an “uplifting moment” when the Umbrella Movement comes to a standstill (52–54). Lu and Wong draw the conclusion that a movement may serve as a public space for collective memories and affective politics.

These discussions lead to the possibility of exploring poetry written by the young people in the movements of the two cities. Many young adults condemn the perceived ignorance of Taiwanese politicians who they see as taking advantage of both sides and leaving the local people nothing but turmoil. Their suffocated emotion, after a series of aspirational failures, will inevitably break out. The Sunflower and Umbrella Movements bring out such an opportunity to aspire and illustrate a better political circumstance. The social movements generate a new form of knowledge that security, independence, autonomy, freedom, and human rights are more important than money, that is, trade with China. The social movements also reconnect with fundamental elements of spirituality such as love and hope (Clammer 246). Seeking a “voice as culture capacity,” some of the young adults write poems to express their views and “collective identifications and satisfaction” (63–66). They, regarded as “citizen-as-artist and artist-as-citizen,” symbolically illustrate the “constraints and possibilities” that define the “conditions for life,” and at the same time portray a “worldview,” a “common sense” that is leery of the policy (Lu and Wong 48). Therefore, poetry is resistance, it claims the existence of participants: “Look at me, I am here.”

Writing Poetry to Resist

This paper derives from a research project investigating 53 poems from the poetry collection *Yellow Poetry / Ribbon* (黃詩帶), as well as 84 poems from volume 24 of the magazine *Off the*

Roll, Poetry + (衛生紙詩刊+). Although the similarity of resistance is conspicuous, there still exists a huge difference in literary attitude. The Hong Kong collection, edited by the young poet Sai Cho (西草), stresses the emerging writers who try to respond to the city's chaos. Following the great literary tradition of revolting, they compose lyric poems in a style of elegance with rigorous metrical lines. Sai Cho also mentions the role of media to spread their works, "every day, every week, in the traditional media, on Facebook, there are many new poems posted, along with newspaper articles, photos, video clips, critiques" (3). A poem can not only be a testimony, but also establishes a collective mood shared by the readers. By contrast, the Taiwanese editor Hung Hung (鴻鴻) aims to overturn the notion of poetry as high art. He selects poems that are destructive, non-traditional, and unorthodox. Mockery, pun jokes, and swear words are thus everywhere. Though the contributors are not so much "poets" in a strict sense as amateurs, their works with a straightforward style represent the feeling of the folk more truthfully, as well as enjoy a wider readership than Hong Kong. Therefore, the approaches are different: Yellow Poetry / Ribbon identifies the role of the internet as a platform of sharing and regards the work as a testimony of 'zeitgeist', whereas the Taipei magazine *Off the Roll, Poetry +*, by the initial print run rather than internet, encourages its long-term readers to pay attention so as to magnify the influence of the social movement.

A common strategy for Hong Kong poets is to draw attention to the image of an umbrella and enrich its meanings. Lau Wai Shing's (劉偉成) poem "The Propped-up Riddle" ("撐起的謎語") challenges its readers with the question of what resembles a blossoming, unbent flower throughout the storm, and what looks like a beehive when a number of the objects are open and stand together: "Do you know what it is? / Even if it stabs once, / it pledges the security of homeland. / Do you know what it is?" ("你知道是甚麼嗎? / 即使只能扎一次 / 也誓死保衛自己的家園 / 你知道猜的究竟是甚麼嗎?") (23). In Chong Yuen Sang's (莊元生) "Ode to Umbrella" ("雨傘頌"), the narrator compares umbrella ribs to human bones that crouch under the pressure of life, trying to stretch themselves, but now are beaten into fractures by the police (54). The poem "The Precarious Artistry" ("危險的技藝") composed by the poet Kathy Fish (陸穎魚) finds an umbrella "ascetic," whereas the narrator in another poem "The Style of Vagabond" ("流浪風格") holds a "malnutritious" umbrella (66–67). On the other side of the strait, the sunflower, a symbol coincidentally inspired by a florist's bestowing of bunches of sunflowers to decorate the occupied rostrum, fails to yield such rich imagination and interpretation. Although the flower is connected to the sun – a normal metaphor for the sunrise after the political darkness – still some people try to justify the movement historically and geographically by drawing connections to the flora kinship that symbolises many movements: the Wild Lily Movement in 1990 and Wild Strawberry Movement in 2008 Taiwan, the Carnation Revolution in 1974 Spain, and the Jasmine Revolution

in 2011 Tunisia. To deepen the significance of their works, the Umbrella writers focus on the image to build multiple meanings from within, whereas the Sunflower protesters establish historicity and regionality by finding a connection to the outside, beyond the present.

The poems, exclusively from Hong Kong, have orchestrated a broad dichotomy between the upper and the lower, violence and resistance, eloquence and silence, lies and truth, evil and good, and hypocrisy and morality. Lai Hon Kit's (黎漢傑) work "Where Are the Grown-ups?" ("在哪裏的成年人") narrates a child's struggle in a poor life in contrast to an adult's monetary indulgence: "Children are crying in the tear gas before the dawn / where are the grown-ups? / Are they still fancying a lotto in a dream / with a little smile?" (孩子在凌晨被迫催淚 / 在哪裡的成年人 / 是否還在夢裏幻想六合彩 / 嘴角微微向上翹起) (14). "I Am You: Written for the Umbrella Movement in Mong Kok" ("我就是你——記雨傘運動旺角場") highlights what the author sees as the extremity of the participants: youngsters from various corners strike and hide secrets from their parents, and on the other side, there are police with guns, politicians' nonsensical answers, and the distortions of the media (Sai Cho 19–21). Such a dichotomy is noticeably constructed through a manner of processing and denying in Cheng Ching Hang's (鄭政恆) poem "Feel the Wind Blowing in the Occupied Area" ("在佔領區吹吹風的日子"):

Street is ours

Slogan is ours

Dictatorship is not ours

A lie is not ours

.....

Voice is ours

Action is ours

Frustration is not ours

Damage is not ours

.....

Space is ours

Reason is ours

Hatred is not ours

Money laundering is not ours

(街道是我們的

標語是我們的

專制不是我們的

謊言不是我們的

.....

聲音是我們的

行動是我們的

挫敗不是我們的

破壞不是我們的

.....

空間是我們的

理性是我們的

憎恨不是我們的

利益不是我們的) (40-41)

However, the contradictory factors, after intertwining with each other by the adoption of the grand narrative, could explain the sense of the historical moment within the authors. Echoing Charles Dickens' famous dictum in *A Tale of Two Cities* – “it was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity”(17) – Lee Ho Him's (李顯謙) work “The Time of Tears” (“催淚時代”) provides a new perspective on the same issue: the golden age is also the age of collapse, the epoch of freedom is the epoch of desperation, and everyone takes a shot at hopes in the ethical time (28). Challenging the concept of “golden age,” the narrator in “Yellow Poetry / Ribbon:

Darkness” (“黃詩帶——黑夜”) argues that “comfort and freedom” are actually given in a “cage.” Under a grand narrative that places progress of Hong Kong history into a worse and less democratic situation, a possibility of hope and liberation is maintained. For example, Jenny’s (珍妮) poem “A Poem for the Resistant People in the Admiralty” (“為金鐘堅守者而作”) states: “the song of our time / is endowed with resistance and braveness / that cover the asphalted crossroad” (“我們的時代曲 / 賦予堅信與勇氣與希冀 / 覆蓋瀝青的十字路口”) (44). In the poem “Edo-Tokyo Museum” (“江戶東京博物館”), the exhibited articles, statutes, and daily practices, unmoving as though frozen in a specific moment, give the feeling to the narrator that the future Hong Kong people will perceive the present movement in this way too (24). The grand narrative, in not silencing the details of this time, highlights the subaltern and encourages their compatriots to “stand in an ideal posture” and fight for freedom. Together they argue that a better world will not come if the people as a collective do nothing right now.

When the Sunflower protesters are stigmatised as “mobsters” (“暴民”), they know how to change such a verbal attack into a positive manner to justify their actions. “Song for the Mob” (“暴民之歌”) by Hung Hung subverts the stigma by saying that the mob (“we”) actually shake a fist at injustice. “We” are the “mobsters of love.” “We” occupy the place that was once a corrupt domain for greed, and now is transformed into a “warm cradle” and a “studio to record a song of the future” (3). The image of “mobsters” is re-defined not only in Hung Hung’s poem, but also in other works. They are the “revolutionists” in the eyes of A Mi (阿米 13), the “soldiers” from the perspective of A Bu (阿布 8), and the “losers in a comedy of revolution” in Shiu He (許赫 20). In the poem of Ching Hsiang Hai (鯨向海), the protesters are illustrated as “the sleepless” (“失眠者”), who “refuse to surrender,” still “aspire for peace,” “have a dream,” and finally “become mobsters” (47). Therefore, the Umbrella protesters attach themselves to positive characteristics by discrediting the negative ones, whereas the Sunflower young adults utilise a strategy of linguistic reversion to subvert their meaning towards a positive multiplicity.

Poetry as a Field for Freedom

To scrutinise the social movement’s capacity for revolt, one cannot avoid the use of poetry in which protests and freedom are expressed by distinctive literariness, syntax, and rhythms. The concept of carnival in Bakhtin’s theory and that of dissemination in Derrida’s argument are useful methodologies to shed light on the manner of the young adults and their aspirations.

In Bakhtin’s idea, carnival, or the folk culture, is non-official, sacrilegious, a sort of temporary liberation from the established order. It temporally suspends all hierarchical ranks,

privileges, laws, restrictions, and prohibitions. Just as the goal of a carnival is to turn the cognitive world upside down, so too the human lower body – the belly, the bowels, and sex organs – reconquers the attention to produce a powerful symbol of renewal and rebirth. The body which can eat, drink, fart, and most importantly, laugh subverts authority and welcomes the body's openness for growth (Renfrew 140–142). Regarding literature, Bakhtin's concept will allow the possibility to scrutinise the carnival spirit illustrated through the rhetorical function of parody, joke, humour, irony, and whim.

Bakhtin's theory helps to understand why such work, or in a broad view, the atmosphere of the occupied spaces of the Parliament and Central, are sometimes jolly, profane, and vulgar. For instance, some hilarious titles of the Sunflower poems suggest alternative voices, not from the privileged, but from the subaltern, so as to draw attention back to everyday practice, to open a carnivalistic gap for the force of life, as well as to deride the authority and the Trade Agreement: Mi's (謎) "Bring My Shit back" ("把我的大便還給我" 33), Lin Wei-yun's (林蔚昀) "Mom, We May Not Have Bed Sheets Tomorrow, I Will Buy Them" ("媽媽我們明天也許沒有床單了, 就我們去買" 42), Chen I-en's (陳以恩) "Believe the Six Unbelievable Things Before Breakfast" ("吃早餐前相信六件不可能的事" 15), and her "Supermarket" ("超級市場" 15). The folk resistance to high culture and hegemony can also be seen in the poem "A Loser in a Comedy of Revolution" ("魯蛇的革命喜劇") where the narrator is not a classic hero onstage, but a loser, and one of the audience:

My performance is to chat, flirt with girls
 go to the nearest store and buy something to boost economy
 post the latest news on Facebook
 or play Candy Crush twice

My performance is
 to sweat when it's hot
 to shiver when it's cold
 and swear when I'm angry

(我的戲是聊天虧妹
 到附近商店買東西振興經濟
 臉書貼上最新訊息

或者來兩局 Candy Crush

我的戲是

熱的時候流汗

冷的時候發抖

還有氣的時候罵髒話) (Shiu He 20)

The carnivalistic overtones can also be found in an old tale adapted to modern lessons. Lin Lin's (林林) "The Emperor's New Clothes" ("國王的新衣") emphasises the people's counterattack against corruption: "this time / our little boy / not just exposes the lie / but also throws out a shoe" ("我們的小男孩 / 不只戳穿謊言 / 這次 / 還扔出了鞋子") (10). The shoe contains two meanings: it is, like the subaltern, suppressed under the feet, but more related to the land. The flying shoe suggests the rising anger of people, and the dissatisfaction with the politicians. The alternative vulgar, naughty, and ironical voice, which is borrowed either from daily life or an old fairy tale, not only enables the protesters to find a literary space to criticise, but also brings the social awareness from the politician's rhetoric to the people's realistic daily life, and to the everyday bread.

Derrida's deconstructive concept of dissemination could explain how writings can subvert logos, speech, and ideology. As an instance to depict the ambiguity of writing, the word "pharmakon" can be medicine, recipe, spell, charm, and – the opposite meaning – poison. Hence, writing, which is ambivalent and irreducible to conceptual opposition such as remedy/poison, true/false, positive/negative that are constructed by logos, meanders in an indeterminate zone and allows for deconstruction (70–72).

The concept of deconstruction can shed light on the works of the young subaltern. To illustrate, Lau Lau's (樓樓) Umbrella poem "The City of Quibble" (詭辯之城) demonstrates the manner of word subversion:

We become a storm described by phrases

We are endowed with the character of puppet

We are called sarcastically as politicians, rogues, and criminals

We have no choice but to raise our hands

and become an untarnished mirror

(我們就成為被言辭敘述的風暴
 我們就被賦予了人偶的屬性
 笑成政棍、站成流氓而傷成罪犯
 我們就只好高舉雙手
 做一塊抹不黑的鏡子) (37)

Words, when finding their own properties of ambivalence in the system of signification, can be a thunderous storm, a weapon pointed in reverse at authority. The stigmatisation of “rogues” and “criminals” turns into a positive and empowers the young subaltern. The word play, reminiscent of Derrida’s “pharmakon,” or “différance,” can also be seen in Hsu Hsu’s (徐徐) Sunflower poem “The Confused Magician” (“糊塗魔術師”), where a normal baguette, through a black box, becomes a bloody truncheon (12). To defer / differ the meanings, A Mang’s (阿芒) poem “After the Movement: Am I Sick?” (“後學運之我生病了嗎”) plays a homophonic strategy, like using “herding antelope” (“kang-ling-yang,” in Standard Mandarin, “趕羚羊”) to allude to the phrase “fuck your mother” (“kan-nin-niang,” in Taiwanese Mandarin, “幹您娘”), and a common female name “Shu-na” (“淑娜” in Standard Mandarin) to point to a once-negative-but-now-subversive word “coward” (“su-la,” “卒仔” in Taiwanese Mandarin), as well as the homographic method, such as “sun” self-depreciated into “large intestine”, and “sunflower” into “banana” (25). Just as “différance” cancels the metaphysics of presence and challenges the attribute of logocentrism in which speech enjoys the privilege over writing, so too the word play in a social movement can find its position, not being assimilated, conceptualised and disciplined, but always being fluid, versatile, and open to different mood, thoughts, concepts, aspirations, and all possibilities. Poetry subverts authority.

Conclusion: Will Democracy Come?

Poetry is a field to express freedom. This literary field is sometimes overlapped with the actual field – the Central in Hong Kong and the parliament in Taiwan, or can be seen as an extension from the tangible world to a world of ideas. The following question can be: Can the young adults really speak? The answer can be both yes and no. It might be negative; when the rate of youth unemployment is too high, they feel insecure about the policies implemented by their elders, their core values of democracy and freedom are threatened, the capacity to aspire is frustrated in the face of the state apparatus, the reference to opportunities is restrained, and they are silenced. Yet the answer may be positive; when the time is out of joint, they can still find liberal arts as the last resort to express their ideas, or when the political system returns to a healthy state. It is not only

because literature welcomes dislocation, disruption, interruption, transformation, resistance, and mostly, otherness, but also in that, if we borrow Derrida's concept, it is able to suggest democracy to come. "Democracy" is never present but is always deferred; "to come" ("à venir") implies the unforeseeable coming of the event. Hence, the idea of democracy to come is not here-and-now, but unimaginable, open, various, and heterogeneous, without telos, and without knowable destination. It also makes sense to see how the young adults richly use the metaphors of "tomorrow," "dawn," and "daybreak" in order to suggest somewhere a society can head for. Such a place, a dream, a future, an existential utopia, the democracy to come, cannot be reduced to a simple idea of identities, human rights, justice, freedom, and so on. It should keep itself always open and full of possibilities. The signifier pointing to the future is manifested, but the signified explaining its content must be multiple.

When the two social movements came to an end, both sets of protesters were eager to know how to continue such a powerful social force. They have changed their tactics to "blossom everywhere," so as to diffuse what they believed to other ongoing civil organisations. The Sunflower Movement was disseminated into many groups such as Democracy Lecture Hall (民主講堂), the Appendectomy Project (割闌尾計畫), the Taiwan March (or literally, Island Nation March, 島國前進), and most importantly, the New Power Party (時代力量). The 2016 elections saw Tsai Ing-wen, who is wary of Chinese assimilation, selected as the new president, and gave the Chinese Nationalist Party (or Kuomintang) fewer seats in the parliament, seemingly a gesture of distrust of their intentions regarding relations with the mainland ("An Election"). On the other side, Hong Kong identity has grown up after the disillusionment with the "one China, two systems" policy. Their force was extended to the anti-extradition movement in 2019. But now, when I am revising this article in June 2020, Beijing has just enacted the National Security Law for Hong Kong. The forthcoming legislation is expected to criminalise separatism, subversion of state power, terrorist activities, and foreign interference. The effects include jailed journalists, penalties for critical news outlets, retroactive charges, declining digital freedom, restrictions on artistic and academic expression, and crackdowns on religious communities (Cook). We do not know how long the darkness will be.

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Author Biography

Wen-chi Li is studying for a PhD in Sinology at the University of Zurich, after receiving his MSc by Research in Chinese Studies at the University of Edinburgh. He and his co-translator Colin Bramwell won first prize in the 2018 John Dryden Translation Competition.