Hong Kong's Anime:

A Cultural History of Anime in Hong Kong's Last Decade

Mateja Kovacic

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Abstract

In 2019 and 2020, Hong Kong experienced waves of anti-government protests, with millions participating both online and offline. The semiotic of transnational popular culture references, including film and music, played a crucial role in these protests. Japanese animation and manga were especially prominent in online and offline communication, in the form of memes, slogans, videos, and activist art produced mostly by people under 29 years of age. Namely, anime and manga became not only the primary audio-visual language of the protests but also a transnational pop digital anarchist network between Hong Kong and the rest of the world. This article refers to this phenomenon as "Hong Kong's anime" due to its unique transformation, adaptation, and sociocultural and political significance during these protests. Anime has a heterogeneous history as both institutional soft power and non-institutionalized fandom. While acknowledging the heterogeneous landscape of anime, this article focuses on its potential as a "transnational pop digital anarchist network" by analyzing its role in shaping people's transnational cultural history and in writing people's historiography. Based on interviews with the creators of protest art and the analysis of online and offline content, Hong Kong's anime is revealed to be a new form of transnational historiography, emerging from transnational pop digital anarchist networks and connecting ordinary people in Hong Kong and worldwide through anime.

Keywords: Anime, Hong Kong, transnational history, digital activism, popular culture

Author Bio: Mateja is Assistant Professor in Game Design and Animation at the Department of Interactive Media, Hong Kong Baptist University. She specializes in analyzing knowledge and epistemologies created at the intersections between science, technology, and popular culture.

Being Otaku: Transnational Pop Digital Anarchist Networks

From March 2019 to May 2020, public protests in Hong Kong centered around the "Fugitive Offenders and Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters Legislation (Amendment) Bill 2019," or simply the "Bill." The Bill included mainland China, Macau and Taiwan in Hong Kong's extradition laws, with the Chief Executive, appointed by the State Council of the People's Republic of China (PRC), having the authority over extraditions. The protesters were concerned primarily with how the Bill will affect the freedom of speech, as well as pro-democracy and pro-independence activism in Hong Kong.

Figure 1 Artwork of Sailor Moon wearing a gas mask.

During this time, Japanese animation emerged as an essential and privileged form of communication thanks to its rich cultural history in Hong Kong, and it continues to play an integral role in everyday life (see Figure 1).

A key aspect of the 2019 protests was not solely its transcultural verbiage of popular media references—including Bruce Lee and *The Hunger Games* (2012)—but also its transnational nature, which becomes evident in its plethora of examples relating to anime. For example, Agnes Chow Ting, one of the faces of Hong Kong protests, active in the

Japanese media throughout the protests, appealing to the public in Japan for support (see Figure 2), emphasized her love for Japanese animation and popular culture and was praised by the media and the public in Japan for speaking fluent self-taught Japanese during interviews.

A second example is visible in the way that anime directors in Japan used social media, including Reddit, to support the protests (see Figures 3–4).

Figure 2: Agnes Chow on social media, often compared with Mulan from Disney's Mulan (1998).

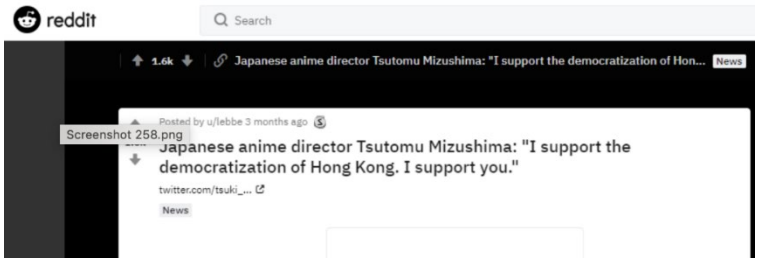

Figure 4 Anime director Tsutomu Mizushima, known for Girls und Panzer (2012–2023) and xxxHOLiC (2005–2011), voicing support for the Hong Kong protests on Reddit. (Left)

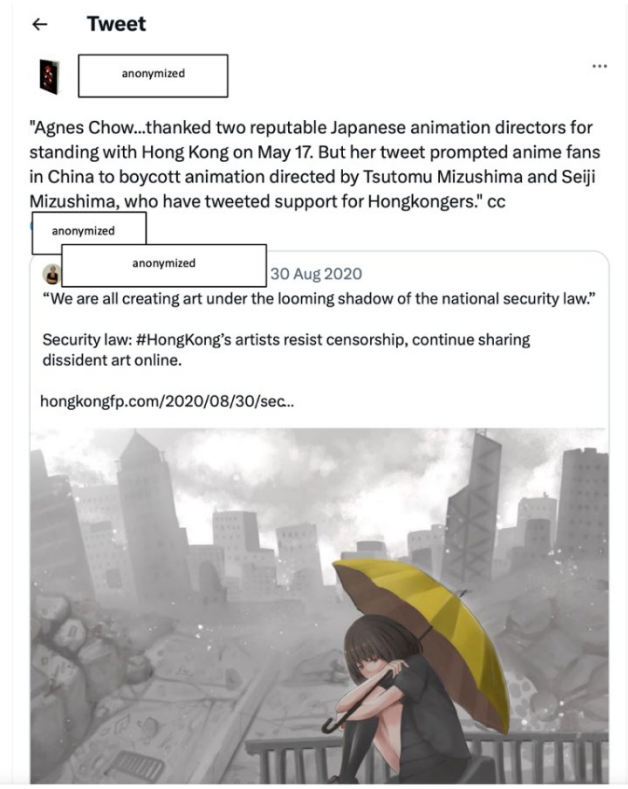

Figure 3 Agnes Chow thanks anime directors Tsutomu Mizushima and Seiji Mizushima in a Tweet for supporting the Hong Kong protests. (Right)

Similar examples abound: adult manga creators in Japan added slogans from Hong Kong protests and references to the contested history of protests in China into their work (see Figure 5).

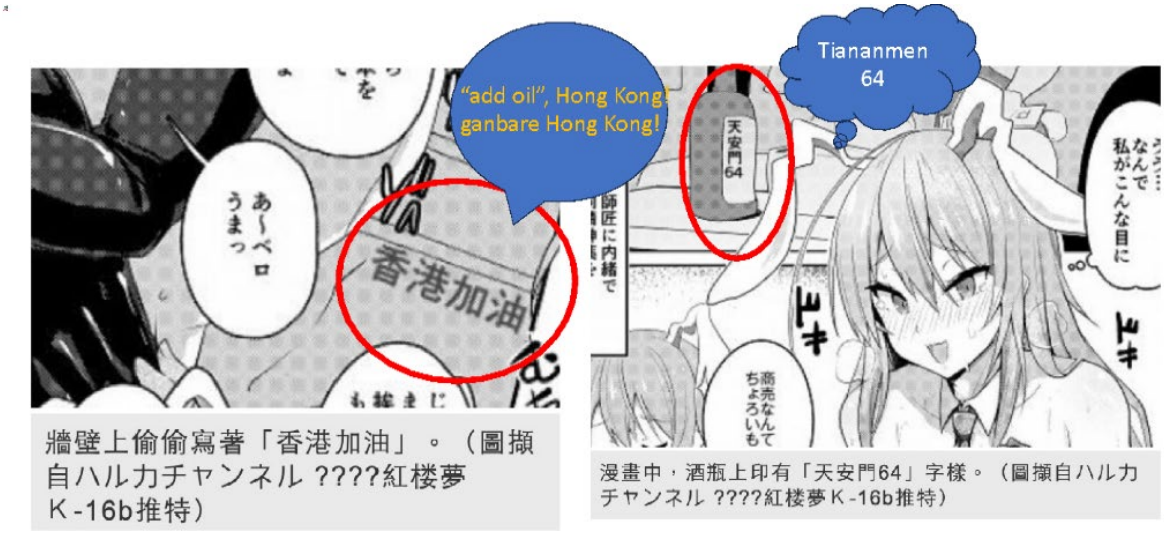

Figure 5 Japanese adult manga artists inserted the slogans "Add oil, Hong Kong" and "Tiananmen 64" in The Dream of Red Mansions on [18+].

Then at the world's largest *dôjin* annual event in Tokyo, Comic Market 97, held in 2019, a self-publishing group Muyûbyôsha Byôtô ("Hong Kong Dream Walker") published a manga book in Japanese titled *Honkon sensen kiroku* ("The Hongkongers Resist Documentary") (see Figures 6–7). It was handed out for free and was available for free download on the Internet.[1] Likewise, ordinary people in

Figure 6 Announcement for Honkon sensen kiroku (The Hongkongers Resist Documentary) at Comic Market 97 by Hong Kong Dream Walker group.

Japan showed their support through blog articles, social network posts, and visual art, complementing user discussions and generating transnational connections.

Figure 7 Honkon sensen kiroku at Comiket 97.

A highly compelling aspect of the protests was its fantasy-reality dynamic of action grounded in a shared transnational popular culture. Anime was seen as a universal humanitarian language. As manga artists and creators of protest art Rei and Ryoji explained during an interview:

> Japanese people perceive anime and manga as far from politics, but in Hong Kong, we connect and refer the political situation to things that happen in manga. It makes us realize that the things in anime and manga have entered real life, or at least draw a parallel with real life, so we think that manga and politics are not separated that much.[2]

Based on digital and physical surveys, interactions with protesters, and interviews with the creators of protest art, this article analyzes and interprets the

cultural history of Hong Kong's anime, particularly in recent lights. It also explores new forms of historiography arising from its transnational pop digital anarchist networks, because the voices from the creators of Hong Kong's anime and manga, like those of Rei and Ryoji, suggest a new kind of historiography—one that is transnational and cultural, as opposed to state-produced and institutional. They share the idea that the people's history needs to be narrated and preserved through transnational visual language.

Anime has enabled the creation of transnational pop digital anarchist networks: the decentralized, non-institutional online networks of anime fandoms and cultures shared by ordinary people beyond geographical and national borders and across multiple languages and cultural contexts. "Transnational" refers to informal, non-institutional cultural flows. "Anarchism" refers to mutual aid and cooperatism, not the Western idea of violently abolishing the government. This is not political so much as a view of life grounded in decentralized relations aimed at survival and coexistence in which digital popular culture is now crucial.[3] Based on scientific studies of multispecies symbioses,[4] the term describes both the nature and potential of digital networks. "Cooperatism" is a term translated from the Japanese "kyōryoku," which has been used by the anarchists in Japan as an epistemological means, derived from the scientific study of nature, to highlight that cooperation, not competition was the basis of life and evolution.[5]

Additionally, the protests in Hong Kong were characterized by a lack of hierarchy or centralized leadership, as digital technology and media enabled new forms of social connections. Throughout, digital practices and online DIY culture changed how people interact both with and through anime.

Digital technology and global interconnectedness through the Internet have contributed to the ways popular culture – Hong Kong's anime included – is

produced, consumed, communicated, and used beyond traditional institutional frameworks. For instance, the global popularity of anime arose thanks not only to anime exports, but also to fans' offline and online networks. Before the 1990s, fans shared illegal copies of anime on VHS; later, they used CDs, DVDs, torrents, and streaming websites. This illegally circulated anime was also subbed, mostly in English, for free by fans. Before the Internet made content more accessible and shareable, anime was exchanged through postal mail and at anime-and-manga-related events, shaping and solidifying fandom communities. In other words, the non-institutional cultural history of anime reveals the existence of cooperatist networks and transnational communities that must be considered beyond national frameworks such as Cool Japan.

The connectivity between the Hong Kong public, the Japanese public, and the rest of the world created through anime are also highlighted, as anime became a transnational network for cooperatism, mutual aid, coexistence, and survival. As a shared culture, anime enabled interaction and closeness with people outside Hong Kong. It also became an informative media, fulfilling the role of the people's news not curated by the institutional media but by the people, as noted by an artist-activist and creator of protest artwork:

> Of course, classic or traditional media have occupied TV, while we had our choice to use the Internet to spread what we saw and what we trusted. Another version of the news, the true version of the news. Also, it wasn't just me drawing: there were many Hong Kong people trying to draw a lot of works related to Hong Kong, so it's kind of like a gathering together to create and express what we saw on a larger scale. People internationally would get more chances to know various versions of the news instead of only pro-Beijing media. It was important for people like us, who are not politicians, who are just regular citizens, to try and create something that doesn't align with the pro-Beijing media.[6]

Asuka concluded: "If the efficiency of manga was that I could use a more abstract and easy way to express [Hong Kong's situation], even people without knowing the

context could easily access the situation in Hong Kong."[7]. However, with the increasing government-corporate control over digital content, there was a noticeable return to the analog publishing form:

> We finished our *dôjinshi* project last year (…) with the aim to publish in the Japanese market. Japan has a rule that a published book can enter the public library collection in the national archive of Japan so the publication can be preserved permanently. Our group's original goal was to get it published and get it into the public libraries.[8]

Asuka similarly noted:

> The Internet is becoming more powerful, which is why the Hong Kong government and police have arrested many people who were active online. It sounds like the Internet is losing [against the authorities]. I guess I foresaw this situation when I decided to print my [comic] books. Digital format is easier to erase. When it's gone, it's gone forever. But printed comic books are more difficult to delete suddenly. Even if they sell in other countries, they [the government] have no right to ban it or delete it over there.[9]

Enabled by digital platforms and phone apps, the Hong Kong protests were decentralized and leaderless. They demonstrate the anarchist character of digital media and illustrate how various apps, social networks, and platforms were deployed as nodal points in a rhizomatic breakdown of "the national history." While its practical outcome was the alignment of online and offline activism and the dismantling of hierarchies, the theoretical consequences lie in demonstrating the anarchist potential and character of digital media in historiography. This shift also has significant implications for public participation and marks a notable change in the understanding of history. The potential anarchist nature of digital networks and transnational popular culture realized a new consciousness of who writes history and how history is made outside logocentric frameworks (Derrida, 1982). Physical manga protest books published overseas are anarchist in the sense that the people did not rely on institutional and academic history writing. Such use of digital media and popular culture is not unique to Hong Kong. What makes

it distinctive, however, is the generative force with which protesters and activists used cultural content over the last decade to produce new meanings, maintain transnational social networks, and actively intervene in the reality, history, and historiography of Hong Kong through transnational popular culture.

Hong Kong's Anime as Transnational Cultural History

"Hong Kong's anime" is not solely about animation, protests, or even visual language. Rather, it is a cultural history shaped since the 1950s, when manga—and later anime—first appeared in Hong Kong. This transnational history is experienced through the ordinary lives of protesters, its historiography recorded in people's transnational pop semiotics shared by both the people in Hong Kong and a global audience, facilitated by the everyday practices of the otaku community.[10]

Anime has been regularly broadcast on television in Hong Kong since the 1980s. *Dragon Ball* started airing on TVB in 1988, followed by *Sailor Moon* (1992–1997), *Pokémon* (1997–present), *Digimon* (1999–2000), and many more. A major related cultural influence was manga. Locally produced martial arts comic books and live-action films, popular in the 1970s and 1980s, often incorporated visual elements from anime and manga,[11] as did Hong Kong animation. Since the first TV-broadcasted anime in the 1960s, it has become an integral part of Hong Kong's culture and society, continuously impacting the stylistic development of Hong Kong's creative content. For instance, contemporary Hong Kong animator Tommy Ng (*Another World*, 2019) cites Miyazaki Hayao and Studio Ghibli as inspiration, while KongKee (*Dragon's Delusion*, 2019) was influenced by Katushiro Otomo's *Akira* (1988) and Mamoru Oshii's *Ghost in the Shell* (1995).

Public engagement is crucial in the formation of social and political change, and Hong Kong's anime became a primary conduit for such engagement, particularly

among school and university students following the Umbrella Movement in 2014. While the protesters in Hong Kong used Japanese animation to communicate, they also used it to participate in public life. Anime and manga played an important role in history-writing and history-making here, culminating with the 2019 protests. Toji, an activist artist, found manga such as *One Piece* especially suitable as historiography because of the feeling of loss and, consequently, the lack of interest in "real" history: "After 2019, people started to lose interest in Hong Kong history (…) I think people are now less concerned with the real history because of 2019."[12] Therefore, Toji decided to combine *One Piece* with the history of Hong Kong to foster new engagements. They specifically stated that they are interested in the people's history and are writing from that perspective, as opposed to the institutionalized focus on "important" national and international events, using manga as their medium.

As the examples above just begin to demonstrate, Japanese animation has had a significant impact on global popular culture.[13] In East Asia, Hong Kong has been the largest importer of Japanese music between 1988 and 2005, particularly through Cantonese cover songs, karaoke bars, and TV shows.[14] Japan's cultural influence stems partly from its cultural and geographical proximity, the commercial scale of anime and manga in Japan, and the proactive exportation of its cultural products, but also from the global fandom that grew from circulating pirated fansubbed copies. Its popularity, both institutionalized and non-institutionalized, is often attributed to those transnational aesthetics that Susan Napier has identified as anime's global appeal.[15] However, other scholars have criticized the "cultural proximity" and "statelessness" of anime, as another way of understanding its popularity in East Asia.[16]

Paradoxically, this "stateless" anime is one of Japan's most recognizable cultural exports precisely because anime embeds the local conventions of Japanese culture and anime-making in its visual style and storytelling.

With the rise of the internet and streaming services such as Netflix (est. 1997), viewers have gained increasing access to more diverse genres of Japanese animation. Since the 1980s, *Mobile Suit Gundam* (1979–1980), *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (*EVA,* 1995–1996), *One Piece* (1999–present), *Naruto* (2002–2007), the films of Hayao Miyazaki and Makoto Shinkai, *Attack on Titan* (2013–present), and *Demon Slayer* (2019–present), have all maintained a large, dedicated audience in Hong Kong. Physical hotspots across Hong Kong, such as Sino Center in Mong Kok, offer anime, manga, music, video games, figurines, and other Japanese merchandise. Moreover, Japanese animation became a part of Hong Kong's youth culture in other ways. In the contemporary digital culture of memes, GIFs, digital art, and other forms of digital visual communication, anime and manga serve as a common everyday language beyond simply being entertainment displayed on smart devices. Anime images are regularly circulated and shared online, often accompanied by messages in Cantonese. Sometimes humorous and other times serving as social commentary, these images have become part of the everyday life of Hong Kong people. For example Pikachu, the cute yellow creature from *Pokémon* (1997–present), is currently associated with Hong Kong's top politician, whom it symbolizes without verbalization. As such, Pikachu will incite subdued giggles but not comments. Part of this reaction stems from the political situation following 2019, when Hong Kong's anime became the language of protest, rebellion, and resistance against Hong Kong and Chinese government.

Figure 8 A protester dressed in a Doraemon costume.

Characters such as Doraemon, Sailor Moon, and various Pokémon and Digimon became the mascots of the protests. (see figures 8–9).

Figure 9 Image of Sailor Moon having been shot in the eye while saving Hong Kong children, displayed on the wall of a building in the Sai Yeung Choi Street.

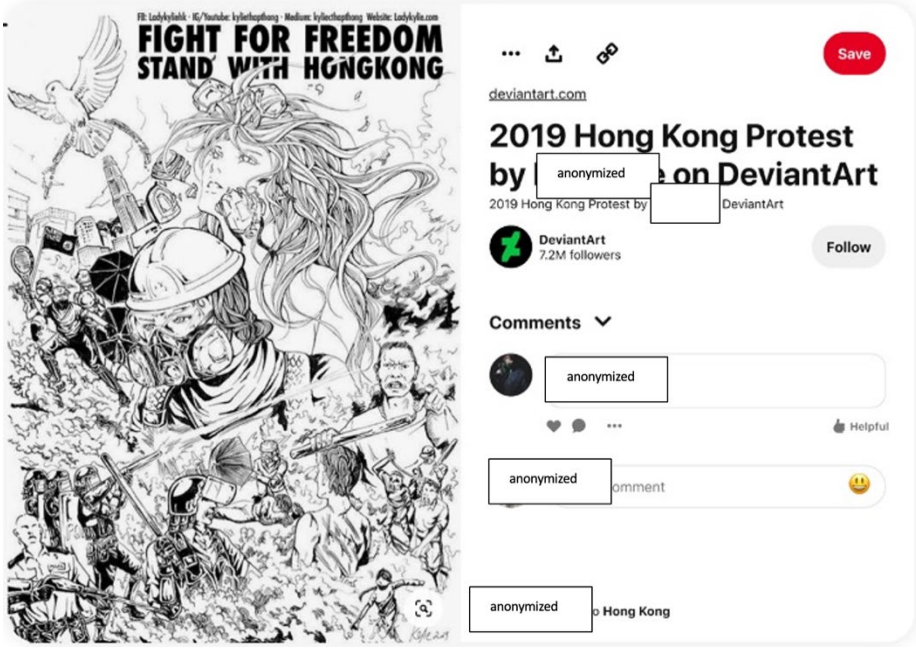

Figure 10 Protest art on DeviantArt.

Transnational pop digital anarchist frameworks highlight the role of non-institutional, cross-cultural networks in everyday life (see Figures 10–11).

Specifically, the transnational anarchist approach focuses on non-institutional historiographers working outside systems of institutionalized power and knowledge. It invites us to notice new roles of digital media, online social networks, and popular culture in sociocultural movements and transnational connectivity. Additionally, it also enables us to identify their role in the construction of transnational cultural histories that are simultaneously universal and local.

Figure 11 A protester with a black star representing China's government, engulfed by Hokusai's Great Wave off Kanagawa in ukiyo-e style.

In the 2019 Hong Kong protests, Japanese animation played a crucial role as an already-existing people's cultural history that also shaped transnational connections online and offline. The

networks enabled by Hong Kong's anime also extended beyond Hong Kong. In mid-2020, an exhibition in Taipei titled *Rebellious Brushes: Anniversary Exhibition of the Anti-ELAB Protests in HK* featured artists from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and South Korea (see Figure 12).[17] In mid-2023, "an independent, grassroots, crowdfunded advocacy group"[18] organized a protest by Hong Kong citizens in Tokyo (see Figure 13).

Figure 12 Image of the "Stand with Hong Kong" march in Shibuya, Tokyo (Stand with HK Japan).

Figure 13 The "Rebellious Brushes" exhibition held in 2020 in Taipei. The main poster for the exhibition features The Heroine [女勇武] by Hong Kong artist Kai Lan Egg [芥蘭炒雞蛋], modeled after Heisei Mary by Japanese artist Shohei Otomo.

What is Hong Kong's Anime?

The number of protesters in the 2019 protests grew from an estimated 10,000 on March 31 to hundreds of thousands on June 9. The main organizer, the Civil Human Rights Front, counted over a million people.[19] A survey conducted among 6,688 respondents showed that 58% of protesters were 29 or younger, 26% were between the ages 20 and 24, and around 18% were 45 or older.[20] Media reports indicated that the protests were shaped by high school and university students.[21] [i] These protests were anarchist in nature, grounded in the principles of mutual aid and cooperatism—the same principle[22] attributed to Japan's early twentieth-century anarchist movement, which also used popular and everyday culture as a vehicle for social movement. Focused on art, education, literature, Esperanto, and other forms of popular culture and lifestyle, they opposed imperialism, war, racism, discrimination, and oppression enacted by state government. They advocated for domestic and international organization based on equality and peace.[23]

Without a "top," "leader," or "chain of command," digital technology and digital literacy became crucial for communication among these protesters, utilizing various mobile apps, social media, digital platforms, and visual content for the planning and execution of protests. They relied on digital media such as AirDrop, which allows untraceable file transfers between Apple iOS devices via Wi-Fi and Bluetooth, and enables information sharing with all nearby Apple iOS devices.[24] Dating app Tinder (see Figure 14), rideshare app Uber, and mobile game *Pokémon Go* were used to facilitate impromptu gatherings, dispersals, and coordination between protesters (e.g., movement, extraction, protection, mapping the whereabouts of fellow protesters and the police). Moreover, the language of digital

[i] I use the term "shaped" instead of "led" to reflect how the protests were decentralized and had no leaders or hierarchical organization.

media was translated into street protests—their temporary structures and participants' roles and organization adapted logistical strategies from video games.[25] In this way *Pokémon Go*, Uber, and Tinder were "tactical media:" that is, digital media and technology used for bottom-up, noncommercial purposes by those excluded from the institutionalized systems of power and knowledge.[26] The number of downloads substantiate the relevance of digital media and digitally shared content in "digital media activism."[27] The Telegram app alone, used for sharing information among protesters, was installed 1.7 million times, with 110,000 new users in July 2019—four times more than the previous year in July 2018.[28]

Cultural artifacts in the streets and on the Internet show that popular visual culture has played a crucial role in Hong Kong protests, activism, and public participation since the 2014 Umbrella Movement. Like the protests in 2019, the Umbrella Movement was a response to the change of legislation. The new law allowed the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China to screen candidates running for Hong Kong's Chief Executive – and, simply, meant that only candidates approved by the government in Beijing could participate in Hong Kong elections. The Umbrella Movement derived its name from the umbrellas protesters used as protection from pepper spray and other dispersal methods used by the police.[29] Specifically, the yellow umbrella became the symbol of the 2014 protests, akin to the yellow construction workers' helmets that protestors wore for protection here, and that were

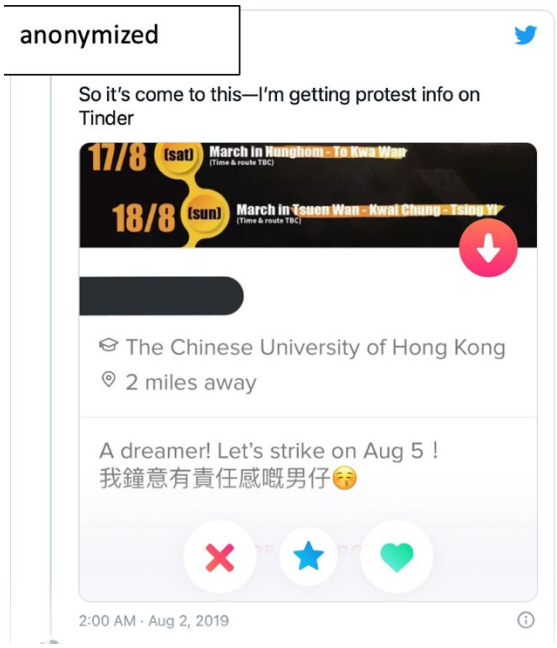

Figure 14 Screenshot of a Tinder user receiving information on the time and place of a protest gathering on August 2, 2019.

later taken up as a similar symbol by protestors in 2019. Characters like Totoro from *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988), Monkey D. Luffy from *One Piece*, and Nobita Nobi from *Doraemon* were among many depicted online and offline with a yellow umbrella and/or yellow helmet (see Figures 15–19).

Figure 15 Nobita and Doraemon

Figure 16 Characters from Doraemon holding yellow umbrellas in support of the protests.

Figure 17 Totoro with a yellow umbrella and helmet.

Figure 18 Poster inspired by One Piece, where a protester, emulating the anime, asks a boy to keep his helmet until his return.

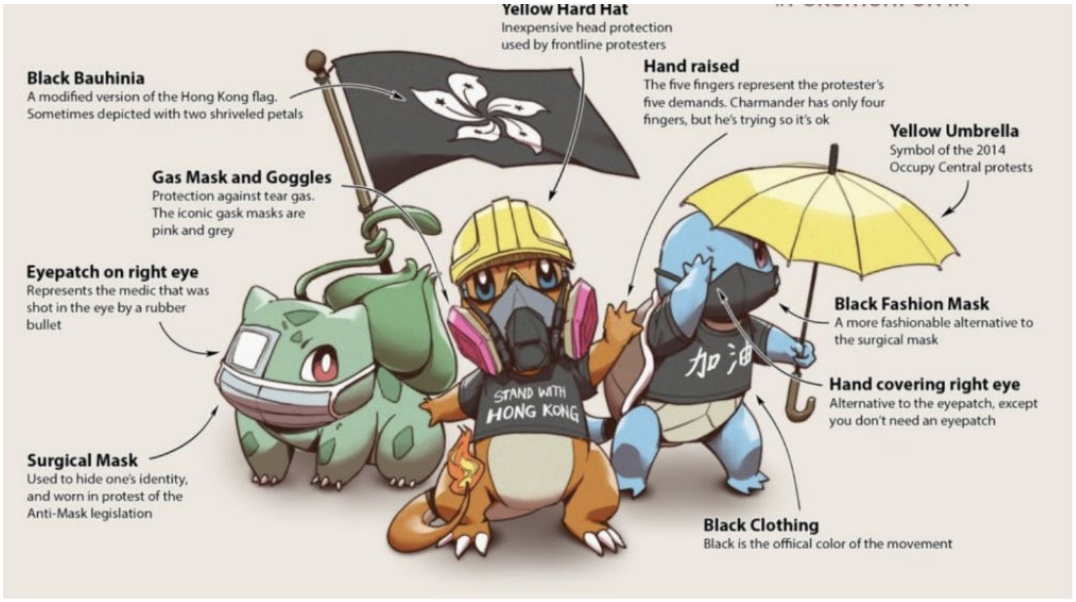

Figure 19 Pokémon explaining the semiotic of protests: medical mask for concealing identity; eyepatch symbolizing a protester shot in the eye by the police; Hong Kong flag with colors changed to resemble the One Piece pirate flag; yellow helmet and yellow umbrella for protection; five fingers representing "five demands;" black T-shirt representing protesters' attire.

In a global context, *Black Panther* (2018) and *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017–present) are examples of popular culture used in social movements, specifically in the Black Lives Matter and abortion rights campaigns in the USA, respectively.

Elsewhere, pro-democracy activists used the three-finger salute from *The Hunger Games* during the 2014 protests in Thailand and Hong Kong's aforementioned Umbrella Movement, demonstrating how "engagement with popular culture can lead to civic engagement through the civic imagination."[30] Throughout 2019 and 2020, protesters in Hong Kong made numerous references to Hong Kong's icon Bruce Lee and films like *Kill Bill* (2003-2004), *V for Vendetta* (2005), *The Hunger Games,* and *Les Misérables* (2012). These references formed a mixture of transnational popular culture that appeared in videos, posters, slogans, memes, images, and graffiti—-both online and offline.

In this transnational mixture, though, Japanese animation formed a prominent form of communication. On August 7, 2020, the protesters staged a laser light show while singing and dancing to the Cantonese version of "Let's Fight" song from *Digimon*. Toji explained: "[*Digimon*] influenced our Hong Kong generation deeply; it means positivity to us. Later generations may have different characters to associate with."[31] For the 1990s generation, *Digimon* is about fighting against evil with courage and unity.[32] Similarly, the protagonist of *Demon Slayer*, Tanjiro Kamado, became intertwined with Bruce Lee's philosophy of "be water," creating an intertextual assemblage. This connection is significant given that Bruce Lee was particularly embraced by the marginalized African American and Asian communities, both on and off screen, amidst the racial politics of the 1960s and 1970s (see Figure 20).[33]

Figure 20 Tanjiro from Demon Slayer with the message "Be Water;" referencing Bruce Lee's martial arts philosophy

Protesters posted videos online where they reported news, and the newspaper *Apple Daily* featured a cover page in the style of *EVA* (see Figure 21). They used *One Piece* visuals in protest art (see Figures 22–23) and slogans such as "We are all Shinji," referring to Shinji Ikari, the protagonist of *EVA*.[34] And these are only a selection of the many online videos that used audio-visuals from Japanese animation. The very reason why such images became powerful and viral is because they translated across cultures and became meaningful to diverse groups of people in and beyond Hong Kong. Two protest manga creators explained:

> Hong Kong popular culture is now localizing and finding local identity including political and social themes. People would love to see things like that and, rather than just entertaining, people seek for resonance with the political situation in popular culture. Hong Kong situation is now in popular culture; we want it to be deep rather than entertaining.[35]

Figure 21 Apple Daily cover featuring writing in the style of a Neon Genesis Evangelion episode title. Apple Daily was closed after the government arrested the CEO and seized its assets.

Figure 22. Luffy from One Piece with messages: "Hong Kong people, add oil!" and "Brothers and sisters, let's rise and fall together/stay together, no matter what!"

Hong Kong protest art inspired by the Japanese anime series "One Piece."

Figure 23 Protesters depicted in the style of One Piece.

Shinji, of anime *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, is a 14-year-old boy piloting a giant bio-mechanical suit who fights aliens attacking post-apocalyptic Earth while experiencing an internal struggle due to abandonment, emotional instability, social alienation, and rejection of reality.[36] In the broader otaku semiotic, anime fans worldwide recognize Shinji as a tortured human being struggling with inner dilemmas amidst external forces and injustice that he can neither control nor escape. Hong Kong protesters identified with Shinji in particular, noting: "We are as confused as Shinji. We can't help asking, 'Why me? What should I do? How can we fight the almighty enemy?' (…) We feel that we are the chosen ones, with the responsibilities of fighting for freedom resting on our shoulders" (San, 27, HK manga fan).[37]

Film producer Peter Tsi, who acquired TV rights to *EVA* in the 1990s, has explained:

> Young people born after 1997 have been shaped by Japanese pop culture (…) Young people are nurtured by Japanese anime and manga, not [Hong Kong broadcaster] TVB dramas, *Harry Potter*, or even Disney cartoons. The core values of these titles are about upholding one's ideals, resistance to authorities, and unity. Adults portrayed in these shows are often hypocritical, corrupted, and selfish like Shinji's father.[38]

Another popular example of Hong Kong's anime has a similar story and main character. *Mobile Suit Gundam* focuses on the war between the Principality of Zeon and the Earth Federation, in which the teenage civilian mechanic Amuro Ray operates a giant robot.[39] Through *Gundam*, director Tomino Yoshiyuki wanted to tell an anti-war story so the viewers could confront the painful realities of war, including the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1939.[40] *One Piece*, a popular TV anime in Hong Kong, was also referenced throughout the protests. *One Piece* is a fantasy anime about the adventures of Monkey D. Luffy, an adolescent orphaned boy, and his crew of pirates. Throughout the series, they help the weak and the oppressed,

which often leads them to confront other pirates as well as the World Government: a corrupt federation of over 170 nations governing most of the world with near-absolute power. In mainstream historiography, pirates are usually portrayed as violent barbarians. However, as *One Piece* narrates, pirate ships were possibly the only human communities for centuries that were based on equality.[41] Hiroki Azuma attributed the new form of anime consumption—database consumption—to *EVA* and *Gundam* specifically.[42] Database consumption is characterized by youth alienation from social and political institutions, as well as from grand narratives, following the 1980s economic crisis and other social, political, and economic crises. Consequently, young people prefer consuming emotionally and intellectually stimulating elements rather than focusing on the narrative itself. This type of consumption parallels the production and consumption of digital content, such as short posts, images, memes, and GIFs.

Hong Kong's anime has three characteristics. First, they draw primarily from the science fiction and fantasy genres. Artists often use these genres as "thought experiments" to imagine different worlds and alternative realities.[43] Second, their protagonists fight to fulfill dreams and create a better future in fantastical, futuristic, or magical realist settings. They are anarchist actors who cooperate with peers to resist and challenge the unjust, corrupt, and oppressive systems of power. Third, the protagonists are adolescent youth, reflecting the vulnerability of this age, where internal struggles clash with external factors, creating a binary Good vs Evil framework. This also mirrors a common age of the protesters: high school and university students. Like many popular cultural artifacts, animation is a popular visual language, transnationally shareable by individuals across the "borders" of ethnicity, geography, class, age, and gender.[44] This culture and its "civic imagination"—"the capacity to imagine alternatives to current cultural, social,

political, or economic conditions"[45]—are both global and locally specific, highlighting local needs and transculturally shared imaginations.

The Politics of "Apolitical" Anime

Anime is often described as pop-culture diplomacy without "cultural odor"—identifiable with a specific culture—[46] and as soft power.[47] Unsurprisingly, some Japanese academics have commented that linking anime with Hong Kong protests was "against common sense" because anime has nothing to do with Japanese politics. Others found it refreshing, and still others have considered the possibility for the same strategy in the anti-US military base movement in Okinawa.[48] The purported erasure of nation(ality) in anime and manga is often credited with contributing to the success of national and cultural branding, the export culture industry, and the Japanese government's Cool Japan "initiative to further strengthen the ties between Japan and other countries (in such areas as economics, culture, and diplomacy)."[49] Napier has translated the Japanese term *mukokuseki* as "stateless" to describe the attractive cultural hybridity of Japanese animation.[50]

However, despite their transnational appearance, the characters are unmistakably identifiable as anime characters—the design of the characters and environment follow the established conventions of anime. This makes anime simultaneously culturally specific and more broadly applicable – or, in other words, it becomes simultaneously Japanese and transnational, since both Japanese and transnational cultures are embedded in and around anime production. In this sense, Stevie Suan has discussed anime's identity at length, asking to "map out a transnational dynamic that is still related to a certain

geography while operating beyond national boundaries."[51] While not all Japanese animation is nationalized as part of the government-backed Cool Japan initiative or other similar programs, anime's national identity becomes more complex when programs like this are involved. Hong Kong's anime, which denotes the mainstream understanding of anime outside Japan, also opens up possibilities for interrogating the post-production transnationality of anime, including the troubles with anime's identity.

For example, Hong Kong's anime draws our attention to how the Japanese government has used anime, which is supposedly nationless and apolitical, for political purposes. An example is *Captain Tsubasa,* which is about an 11-year-old boy who dreams of winning the FIFA World Cup for Japan. Mark MacWilliams has described how "Japan Foundation made broadcasting the new 2001–2002 series on Iraqi national TV one of the key priorities of its cultural diplomacy," while the economic cooperation projects put *Captain Tsubasa* stickers on their supply trucks. A Japanese Foreign Ministry official said they "believe children, who will shape the future of Iraq, will be filled with dreams and hopes by watching the show, and boost pro-Japanese sentiment even more (*The Daily Yomiuri* 2006b). Hence, Captain Tsubasa became a symbol of the bright future shaped by Japan's construction projects."[52] Other examples include naming Doraemon as cultural (anime) ambassador by Japan's Minister of Foreign Affairs in 2008,[53] as well as naming Hello Kitty Japan's tourism ambassador to China and Hong Kong in 2008[54] and global ambassador for the UN in 2019.[55]

Conversely, many anime titles are banned in China for depicting violence and "immoral" themes related to gender, sexuality, sex, delinquency, and rebellion. One of the more popular titles is *My Hero Academia* (2016-present), a TV series about a boy who wants to become a hero but lacks the special powers to

do so. The anime was banned because the character Dr. Daruma Ujiko, whose real name is Maruta Shiga, is a scientist who experiments on humans.[56] His name "maruta" (丸太) is inspired by the Japanese word for primarily Chinese and Korean victims of human experimentation conducted by Unit 731 (a biological warfare unit of the Japanese Imperial Army) during World War II. *My Hero Academia* sparked more controversy after the Sayuri, singer of 2019 season 4 ending song Kôkai no Uta (航海の唄), released a video for the song, which seemingly contained allusions to Hong Kong protests, namely gas masks and overall yellow-black visuals (figure 24).

Figure 24 Sayuri's video alluding to the Hong Kong protests.

Psycho-Pass (2012-2019), a cyberpunk anime thematizing future Japanese society governed by AI in which citizens rebel against the seemingly perfectly ordered system and question its legitimacy, was also banned due to violence and encouraging rebellion and delinquency. In *Psycho-Pass: The Movie* (2015), Japan's government is exporting the AI governance system to less developed authoritarian Southeast Asia Union (SEAUn). As some Japanese join the resistance there to help overthrow the authoritarian regime, it is revealed that Japan's government engineered the civil war so they could export the AI system in cooperation with the SEAUn dictator. Another popular title is the fantasy post-

apocalyptic anime *Attack on Titan* (2013-2023), also banned because of violence. The main character is an adolescent boy, Eren Jaeger, who lives with the remaining humanity behind large walls and becomes a soldier to defend his city against titans—giant humanoids that attack cities and devour humans. Despite the sophisticated weaponry and training, the city walls are breached, and people are decimated by the much more powerful titans. The story resonated with the Hong Kong fans and remained one of the most popular metaphors for China-Hong Kong relationship among Hong Kong fans.

As one protester explained during an interview, “Maybe we're Eren and Mikasa inside Wall Rose. China's recent economic growth and rising international influence had made it a "Titan," and now it was assaulting the democracy within Hong Kong's walls.[57]”[58]

The perception that anime is stateless and apolitical is challenged not only by the culturally specific characters and worldviews embedded by Japanese creators but also by anime stories, which often explore authoritarianism and anarchism, from dystopian *Psycho-Pass* to *sekaikei* (“abstracted world”) *Gundam*, which rejects political and social reality. As the above examples show, messages are encoded and decoded,[59] sometimes unexpectedly by the audience and sometimes consciously by the directors, showing anime can be very political and politically relevant. During the 2019 protests, a “Joint Statement from the Hong Kong College Animation and Comics Fandom on the Amendment to the Fugitive Offenders Ordinance” was published by animation and comic societies, student unions, and *dôjin* groups. The statement expressed that the revision of the Bill “is closely related to the anime and manga fandom” due to censorship legislation. They cited examples from China where digital and physical content was removed, and creators were prosecuted based on featuring “sensitive themes.” The

censorship legislation also targeted Boys Love *dôjin* creators, "threatening Hong Kong's creative freedom and the development of the anime and manga fandom."[60]

National governments have used animation as propaganda, and the cultural industry has used it as a capitalist commercial product.[61] It has been discussed as a form of cultural imperialism,[62] but non-institutional actors have also deployed it to challenge regimes of power and knowledge. Popular cultural artifacts are polysemic. A historical example of animation used to assert and subvert political order is *Princess Iron Fan*, the first Chinese animated feature film made in 1941 by the Wan brothers in Japan-occupied Shanghai. The Wan brothers encoded it with messages that subverted Japan's imperialism, such as the large circle representing the Japanese flag on the robe of the Bull Demon King, the authoritarian cruel monster.[63] Unaware of these references, the Japanese government celebrated *Princess Iron Fan* as a Pan-Asian achievement representing the state ideology. *Princess Iron Fan* demonstrates how animation is communicated, translated, appropriated, and interpreted across cultures after production and is best understood through a transnational perspective focused on non-institutional relations. A similar phenomenon occurred with Hong Kong's anime. The Chinese state media used the same titles as protesters, including *EVA,* in their own anti-protest news videos.[64] Immediately after the protests, the Hong Kong Police Force introduced a new mascot, which was widely compared to Tanjiro from *Demon Slayer* (see Figure 25). However, after online criticism, the Police Force refuted the comparisons.

Figure 2521 The Hong Kong Police Force mascot, "Grape," launched in 2020, with inscriptions: "Blade that eliminates deception" and "Don't chase after petty advantages."

Ismangil and Schneider have described Hong Kong's 2019 "DIY propaganda art" as "networked agitprop"—easily spread through digital networks because it appealed to the shared idea of "nation" in a transnational context. By reinforcing the dichotomous nationalism and nation-building, it became trapped in a "box of imagination," feeding into the hyper-capitalist consumer economy.[65] Focusing on the visual references from the Euro-American context, such as *Star Wars* (1977-present), they wrote that "Referencing transnational popular culture makes an important strategy for agitprop creators to integrate their nation-building efforts into transnational understandings of political struggle and revolution."[66] Indeed, alongside ideas of mutual aid and coexistence, Hong Kong protests contained elements of radicalized nationalism and anti-Chinese xenophobia. This article, however, argues that in the heterogenous polysemic landscape of popular culture, the content creators used transnational popular culture not to practice nation-building but because transnational popular culture is their practice of everyday life:

> Our generation grew up with Japanese manga and anime. We're familiar with this culture and we think this form is better than just saying it [protest]. We share the same thing: being otaku. As otaku, we know the local market and culture, so we decided to use anime and manga. There isn't a particular source of inspiration, it's because we're otaku, we know this culture, so we do it this way.[67]

Hong Kong's anime emerges from a distinct blend of historical, social, and cultural context, giving it a unique character. For example, some content creators have pointed out that they have only low-key cooperative ties with the Japanese content creators because recent anime and manga tend to be funded by capital from China (Rei and Ryoji, Interview, 2022). However, anime is the people's cultural history – and thus, also a transnational cultural history – and these particular interviewees appealed to it as members of the transnational digital community of anime fans:

> Digital media, then, offers us an opportunity to reevaluate the nature and use of past material and whether this flattening is an extension of the "fact" and to use the affordances of technology to present history in multimodal forms, beyond the text (…). Once we understand the ways that chronology orients us in particular directions away from people and experience and see that the long-- form text, the book, complements that emphasis, we can open history to other forms (storytelling and databases) and media (comics and visual forms).[68]

Hong Kong's anime resonates with other historical uses of popular cultures by ordinary people. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the international language Esperanto became popular worldwide as a "language without culture or territorial belonging."[69] Esperanto was central in Japan's non-war and anarchist movements based on the idea of the world as "democratic and non-hierarchical from its natural origins."[70] It spread in the European scientific community as a politically neutral language of universal brotherhood.[71]Therefore, by connecting the history of "analog" social movements with present-day digital ones, we can better understand

the historical importance of Japanese animation, address its historiography critically, and contextualize it within the underrated people's history.[72]

Conclusion

With the digitalization of culture, artifacts like anime have become more accessible and widespread in cultural consumption and social movements. They became a means of maintaining life through mutual aid, cooperation, and coexistence. Observing the impact of digital technologies on communication, research professor in digital media and culture at the University of Sydney John Hartley called for an analytical shift from a linear model to a dialogic one,[73] noting that the digital, participatory, and interactive media enabled the emergence of the "user" who can now engage infinitely with the dialogues constantly produced by the new media.[74] Furthermore, Hong Kong's anime reveals new trends in popular and anarchist historiography as people's writing of cultural history in transnational terms. When activists used animation, they remade its cultural components into coded messages that are readable by the public because of the familiar everydayness they grew up with. Japanese animation, civic participation, social movements, and the practice of everyday life are heterogeneous phenomena. They include contesting ideas and conflicting political, social, individual, and economic interests because they are polysemic. However, digital technology and popular culture enable new everyday practices, and Hong Kong's anime shows how and why they are crucial in changing the idea of "history." With the new forms of people-authored history and historiography that are transnational, digital, anarchist, and pop, we notice both a lengthy history shaped through people's everyday lives and popular culture and identify the potential to change how scholars write and define history.

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