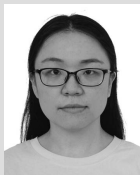


# “Stand with Hong Kong”: Lennon Wall and Participatory Politics in Taiwan



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民衆の抗議の声を落書きやメモの形で公共の場所に掲出するレノン・ウォールが、香港の民主化運動に連帯する形で台湾をはじめとする各地に出現した。その運動の実態と背景を探った。

## Abstract

With sticky notes, posters and decorations on the walls which evidence the development of the the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement and disseminate a supportive sentiment to the protests, the Lennon Walls have existed in many parts of the world. From Bangkok, Hanoi, Tokyo, Seoul, Toronto, Melbourne, London to New York, people recreate the walls in their cities into sites to stand with Hong Kong. Mentioning the Lennon Walls of Taiwan, people in different cities regenerate the walls in public space into the medium that propagate the protests in HK, express their hatred of “China” and even mobilize political campaigns during the president election in January 2020. On the basis of fieldwork in Taipei, Hsinchu and Taichung, the project intends to investigate in what ways are the Lennon Walls deployed politically considering the complex condition of mainland China, HK and Taiwan. Specifically, the research hopes to answer the following questions: How do the people exploit the walls in public space and transform these sites into the political sphere? In what aspects do various social groups shape or reflect to the walls? What are the lost voices that the Lennon Wall conceal since the walls claim to be open and democratic platforms for public expression?

## Keywords

Lennon Wall, Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement, Taiwan, alternative media

## 1. Introduction

With sticky notes, posters and decorations on the walls which showcase the development of the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement and disseminate a supportive sentiment to the protesters, the Lennon Walls “blossom everywhere” from Hong Kong to many parts of the world in 2019. Inheriting the anti-authoritarianism spirit of the original Lennon Wall of Prague, the new Lennon Walls entail the style of Democracy Wall, which was a tool of the Chinese Communist Party to encourage free speech in political struggles. In the late 1970s, the Democracy Wall located at the junction of West Chang’an Avenue and Xidan North Avenue in Beijing denoted the beginning of democratic movements in PRC. People diffused ideas,

discussed political issues, and criticized the socialist system by posting big-character posters and articles on the wall. The Chinese Democracy Wall Movement is the first non-governmental effort to fight for the space of independent speech since 1949 (Chen, 2006). Ten years later, graffiti manifesting the anger and dissatisfaction with Gustáv Husák’s Communist regime appeared on Prague’s Lennon Wall in 1988. The Occupy Central movement in 2014 and the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement in 2019 witnessed the reappearance of Lennon Wall in public spaces in and outside Hong Kong. These walls have become iconic landscapes that connect the scenes of Hong Kong’s protests with the consciousness of people from other regions of the world.

Mentioning the Lennon Walls of Taiwan, people in

different cities revitalize the walls in public space into vessels that propagate the protests in HK, display their hatred of the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) and even mobilize political campaigns during the presidential election in January 2020. This study hopes to analyze the social actors involved in the evolution of Taiwan's Lennon Walls and the politicization of the walls in public spaces. Specifically, the research hopes to answer the following questions: How do people exploit the walls in the public space and transform these sites into the political sphere? In what aspects do various social actors shape or reflect on the walls? What are the lost voices that the Lennon Wall conceal since the walls seem to be open space for public expression? Firstly, the historical investigation and literature review of the conceptions related to the Lennon Wall is going to be conducted to illuminate the path for this research. To follow with, a conceptual frame of alternative media will be elaborated to discuss the Lennon Walls in Taiwan from three perspectives. In the conclusion section, the paper reveals how the contextualisation of the Lennon Wall can be devoted to broadening the scope of alternative media.

## **2. The Democracy Wall**

Looking back at the history of the wall as a place and medium of public expression in social movements, there are two primary historical contexts. One is the Democracy Wall inspired by the May Fourth Movement's advocacy of liberty and democracy, which contains Chinese intellectuals' pursuit of free speech. Between 1978 and 1979, big-character posters with dissents and political opinions were posted on the brick wall of Xidan Street, Xicheng District of Beijing. These posters called for the eradication of Chairman Mao worship and the realization of political democracy. This critical inheritance of the big-character poster's *Pidou* (批鬥, to criticize and denounce someone at a public meeting) function from the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) played a vital role in the late 1970s' ideological emancipation and power struggle inside the CCP. Deng Xiaoping, who supported the Democracy Wall movement, came into power at the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the CCP in 1978. To consolidate the new

leadership, the "noisy" voices from below were finally suppressed. In November 1979, the Second Session of the 5th National People's Congress resolved to ban the Democracy Wall.

Although the Xidan Democracy Wall was officially prohibited, its form and spirit remain on the campuses of Hong Kong's universities. In 2017 and 2018, posters of "Hong Kong independence" existed on the Democracy Walls of the University of Hong Kong (HKU), the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) and the Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU). Mainland Chinese students and local students confronted each other at the Democracy Wall of CUHK. Printed internet memes were utilised by mainland Chinese students to cover the full-page posters. These hilarious memes were appropriated from social media platforms to physical spaces and entertainingly responded to political issues. Neither the anonymous "Hong Kong Independence" poster nor the memes pasted on the wall complied with the "Rules Regarding the Use of Democracy Wall" declared by the Student Union of CUHK<sup>1</sup>. The destructive and retaliatory usages of the Democracy Wall went against the original intention of setting up the walls on campus.

## **3. The Lennon Wall and Hong Kong protests**

The wall located at Grand Priory Square, Malá Strana has been garnished with John Lennon's portrait, anti-war slogans and other symbolic materials since the 1980s. Young Czechs wrote about their dissatisfaction over the communist regime following John Lennon's pursuit of freedom in 1988. After the collapse of the Communist regime, the Lennon Wall became a symbol of free speech and a global landmark against communism. The recreated Lennon Walls nowadays, as venues for supporting Hong Kong protesters, rarely use graffiti, but mostly paste sticky notes, paper posters and other decorations on the walls of public spaces. In other words, the rebirth and proliferation of the Lennon Walls

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<sup>1</sup> The rules demand that signatures of the writers or producers should be noted on the posters.

in the Hong Kong protests are close to the style of the Democracy Wall while follows the anti-authoritarian connotation of the Prague Lennon Wall.

The Lennon Wall first appeared in Hong Kong during the Umbrella Movement in 2014. The wall by the protesters at Central Government Complex, Admiralty, was regarded as part of the occupation movement. The new Lennon Wall with post-it notes of protesters attracted the attention of several researchers. Pan (2015) believes the Lennon Wall is a re-declaration of people's non-commercial use of public space, and a visual pattern of public communication or expression. Besides being part of the protesters' spatial practice, the Lennon Wall in Hong Kong also acts as an emotional connection entity. For instance, Lin (2016) determines it as a form of live alternative media that enables the face-to-face exchange of sentiments and motivations. Adopting this interpretation of the Lennon Wall as a medium, the study continues to explore the forces that shape the alternative media in Taiwan.

If Prague's original Lennon Wall and the Lennon wall in the Umbrella Movement are the created media in a single specific location by dissenters, the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement in 2019 has transmitted the rebellious icon to the globe. In Taiwan and South Korea, vandals attempted to destroy the walls, which caused verbal and even physical conflicts. To fight against external damages, the initiators of these Lennon Walls turned to local administrative authorities and proceeded with legitimate applications of public use. From 2014 to 2019, the contributors and participants of the Lennon Walls have expanded from protesters to a wider range of people. After looking back to the history of the Democracy Wall and Lennon Wall in the past, this paper pays attention to the present and attempts to imagine the possible future of these spaces that are employed politically by the public.

#### 4. Conceptual framework

Spatially, the hundreds of Lennon Walls that emerged on the streets of Hong Kong during the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement showcased certain publicity. The particularity of Taiwan's Lennon Walls is

that they mushroomed outside the geographical realm of Hong Kong's protests, and developed vigorously with the participation of various social forces. The Lennon Walls in Taiwan seem to be ideal public spaces as everyone who stand in front of the walls has the right to write their own opinions or respond to others' words through post-it notes. Such spaces seem to be the place of citizenship "where citizens bodies, words, actions, and produce were all literally on mutual display" (Hartley, 1992, p. 29-30; Mitchell, 1995, p. 116). Nevertheless, the Lennon Walls, as a production of social movement, are the spaces constructed by the society. This article regards the Lennon Walls in Taiwan as a genre of alternative media and discusses the actors concerning the progress of these spectacles.

Briefly, the author defines the concept of alternative media from two dimensions: the mode of production and the content. Alternative media contains the conventional forms of newspaper, radio and television, online media (such as blogs) and other expressive practices (graffiti, performance art) (Hu, 2009). Compared with the mainstream media of "large scale, concentrated capital and technology" (Hamilton, 2000; Downing, 2008; Wang & Li, 2017, p. 94-95), alternative media embraces a more participatory mode of production which emphasizes the audiences' or the public's creation, production and dissemination, contributes to wider communities and creates alternative public sphere (Atton, 2002; Kuang, 2017). When the general public become the contributors of media creation, self-empowered people could also express their opinions on behalf of themselves and the community that they belong to (Luo, 2012). Relying on the dynamic, equal, and collaborative procedure, productions of participatory communication can be achieved by alternative media with the deployment of new media technologies,

Alternative media manifests the feature of resistance considering the aspect of the content. Pajnik and Downing (2008) describe the alternative media in social or political movements as a resistant performance or spectacle consisted of power, ideology and opposition (p. 33). They pointed out the three elements of alternative media: alternative content, interpretive strategies

and production (Ibid, p. 22) to emphasize the deployed words, images, sound or video that challenge the power structure and the audience's capacity to identify, understand and create the content.

According to the previous case studies, alternative media accompanying political movements entails various forms (Downing, 2001). For instance, alternative videos and underground radio performed "as a tool to fight against politics and mainstream media" in the mid-1980s of Taiwan (Kuang, 2011, p. 111). In Lee's (2015) investigation of Hong Kong's online alternative media, alternative media managers were social celebrities or groups that embraced more aggressive political positions (Kuang, 2017, p. 127). As a result, those media platforms would engage in political activities as their contributors coalesced due to shared ideas.

The Lennon Wall in Prague and those reborn with the Hong Kong protests can be interpreted as a particular genre of alternative media. While regenerating the walls in public spaces, these spectacular media have been developed and enriched with the public's participation. Depending on the primary data of fieldwork observations and textual images, this research will analyze the participatory, resistant, and political attributes of the Lennon Walls in Taiwan while noting the legitimization of these sites.

## 5. Methodology

The research methods of this paper include historical investigation, fieldwork and textual analysis. The historical approach in the second and third section of the study focusing on academic articles, books, and online materials has probed the existence and evolvement of the Democracy Wall and Lennon Walls. For the fieldwork part, the author visited nine Lennon Walls of Taiwan in three months to obtain first-hand data for analysis. In 2019, the author conducted a series of fieldwork from September 15 to December 24: National Taiwan University (Student Activity Centre), Ximen Station (a mobile Lennon Wall); National Yang Ming Chiao Tung University (Assembly Building, Student Activity Centre), National Tsing Hua University, Grand-East-Gate pedestrian underpass of Hsinchu; Taichung's

Old Railway Station, Kuang San SOGO pedestrian underpass.

## 6. Discussion

### 6.1. *From cultural citizenship to participatory democracy*

From the Democracy Wall of mainland China to the Lennon Walls in Prague and Hong Kong, the walls in public spaces possess new functions and meanings in the pursuit of democracy and free speech. Transforming the arena in daily life into the public sphere, the contributors revive original walls in creative ways. Taking Hsinchu's Grand-East-Gate pedestrian underpass as an example, the initiators arranged the underpass as a Lennon Wall. Anyone who passes through the space is thus able to use the sticky notes and pens provided by him to leave their own words or ideas. Then, the Grand-East-Gate not only accommodates leisure and entertainment activities but also serves as a venue for civic communication and information dissemination.

As the expressive space set up spontaneously by the public, the Lennon Walls play a role in larger-scale networking as well. On the evening of September 29, 2019, in the plaza of Grand-East-Gate, a film screening event was held to support Hong Kong protesters. The 35th Hong Kong Film Awards Best Film Ten Years (十年 in Chinese), the first story of which can be regarded as a political prophecy was screened (It tells the government's executed plan to shoot two party leaders to foment public support for legislation of the National Security Law in 2025). The film screening was followed by public panel discussions about local and universal issues proposed by a professor from the discipline of China studies. After the event, photos of the night were posted on the Facebook profile of Hsinchu Lennon Wall, a virtual version of the Lennon Wall established in cyberspace. As a result, the Lennon Wall in physical space connects to the virtual space in a global context as the assembly claims to be part of the anti-authoritarian activities in more than 65 cities around the world. The civic action places the city of Hsinchu in the global context, which created cross-space activism. Individual citizens' appearance and discursive practices in public

space due to the concerning of Hong Kong protests implies the cultural dimension of citizenship. Cultural citizenship is a fundamental facet of citizenship that includes the right to express, the right to be represented, and the right of social participation based on shared interests, identities or concerns (Zobl, E & Drüeke, 2012, p. 204; Burgess & Green, 2018, p. 77). The concept not only pays attention to the participatory actions such as reading, consumption, celebration, and criticism in the field of popular culture but also the mobilisation role of new media in daily cultural practice. Individuals in different places who are concerned about Hong Kong through social media established the Lennon Wall, participate in the process of information dissemination during the construction of this public alternative media.

Figure 1-2 were shot at the Lennon Wall in Taichung Old Railway Station. The partition wall between the square and the train track was used as a platform for pasting sticky notes. On the left side of the wall is a propaganda message saying “What Taiwanese can do”, which systematically summarizes the actions that Taiwanese people can take instantly. Since “Vote in 2020 to defend Taiwan” was marked as a mandatory task, the public’s reflection of Hong Kong protests and the upcoming election in Taiwan converged at the operational level.

As a genre of alternative media, the Lennon Walls resemble performance venues, rather than platforms

that provide professional news production. Through people’s practices of writing, posting and expression, these participatory communications exceed the local community and result in global conjunction with the deployment of social media (Luo, 2012, p. 14). Under the specific circumstances of the 2020 Taiwanese presidential election, the established Lennon Walls became the territories of participatory politics.

## 6.2. Battles beyond the wall

In addition to political mobilization, the sprout of alternative media also embodies different processes of social interaction. In mid-October, 2019, the author was attracted by the dialogues between simplified and traditional Chinese characters, as well as English words during the second visiting of the Lennon Wall at National Tsinghua University. As is shown by Figure 3, on the left of the black words “tyranny must die” (red paper), “China has no tyranny” was written on a yellow sticky note in simplified Chinese. The note was followed by a traditional Chinese response: open your eyes and face reality? Moreover, at the bottom of the photo, one simplified Chinese note claimed that “There is no tyranny in China~Under the leadership of the Communist Party, the Chinese people are very happy” while next to the words was a traditional Chinese comment: I dare you to curse Xi Jinping. Referring to Figure 4, on the same note written “Shameful to Taiwan’s DEMOCRACY”,



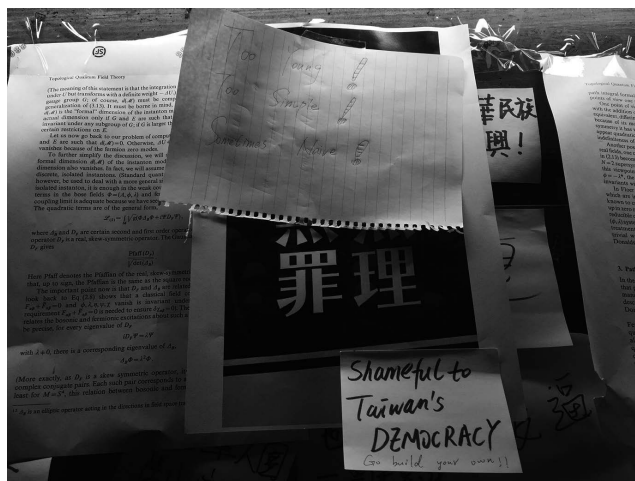
Figure 1-2: the Lennon Wall at Taichung Old Railway Station (December, 2019)



Figure 3-4: the Lennon Wall at National Tsinghua University (October, 2019)

the latecomer corresponded by “Go build your own!!”. These dialogues debates indicated that the wall was no longer just a place to support Hong Kong or a space for disseminating Hong Kong protest information. Considering the future of this regenerated wall, whether it will be shaped like the ground of unilateral self-expression and political declaration, or devolve into the alternative public sphere conveying diverse opinions and even debates is still unclear.

Compared to the Lennon Wall in fixed places, the public gathering formed around the mobile Lennon Wall is another form of a performance venue. The mobile Lennon Wall is an innovative style that has appeared in Hong Kong, Tokyo, Vancouver, Taiwan and other cities since July 2019. Facing the oppositions that may be triggered by the Lennon Wall in public spaces, people came up with the idea of temporary posting and collection activities to support Hong Kong, hoping that such a flexible way of contention would avoid unnecessary conflicts. On the evening of November 15, 2019, Taiwanese people launched the “Mobile Lennon Wall Stands with Hong Kong” action at Exit 6 of Taipei Ximen MRT Station (Figure 5). The black-clothed man wearing a yellow helmet on the right side of the photo kept telling the onlookers about the police brutality in Hong Kong and calls for post-it notes to support the protesters. The man at the centre was wearing a V-shaped mask, an anti-totalitarian symbol derived from the



movie V for Vendetta. The mask has appeared the social protests in South Korea, the Philippines, Chile, Spain and other parts of the world (the image of V for Vendetta also appeared on the Lennon Wall of old Taichung Railway Station, see Figure 1). the mobile Lennon Wall is more like the art of street performance. Although the event took place on the landmark of Taipei, the high-pitched Cantonese slogans of “Free Hong Kong, revolution now. Five demands, not one less.” and the ever-increasing post-it notes forged an atmosphere of resistance across geographical divisions.



Figure 5: Mobile Lennon Wall at Exit 6 of Taipei Ximen MRT Station (November, 2019)

### 6.3. *The lost voice*

The formation and evolution of the Lennon Walls concern several social forces in Taiwan. Most of the renovated walls are existing walls in public spaces, which means initiators, as well as administrators, play a vital role in the appearance of Lennon Walls. The student unions of National Taiwan University, National Tsinghua University, and Yang Ming Chiao Tung University all signified the legitimacy of their established Lennon Walls acknowledged by the universities through announcements. In response to the destruction of the Lennon Walls at the National Taiwan University and National Tsinghua University, both student unions reported the case to the police. The recognition from administrative authorities or the government can objectively transform Lennon Walls into a legal and protected space.

The participants and audience of the Lennon Walls are more than local people, politicians or Hong Kong people who live in Taiwan. On the Lennon Walls of Taichung Old Railway Station, National Taiwan University, messages supporting Hong Kong were written in English (indicated that the writer is from Japan or South Korea), Malay, Spanish and other languages. Defined as a form of participatory alternative media, these Lennon Walls could be situated in an international landscape where people circulate ideas, diffuse information and unleash their creativity.

Among the audiences of the Lennon Walls in Taiwan, Mainland Chinese students have been perceived as enemies of freedom and democracy or the spoiler of the Lennon Walls in online news and discussions. However, it is doubtful whether students from China share the ideologies with the simplified Chinese words on the sticky notes. As is pointed by an anonymous author on Initium Media, mainland Chinese students have been bothered about the lack of basic rights, troubled in frustration and helplessness<sup>2</sup>. The article also mentions that without the possible path to resolutions, silence becomes the only method to cope with the embarrassing situation in Taiwan. Chinese students receive official notice to avoid

participating in political discussions or public debate from the local office for Taiwan affairs before obtaining permission to enter Taiwan (Xu, 2019). Both the internalized external pressure and frustration in daily life probably lead to the loss of Chinese students' voices. For individual Chinese students who pass by the Lennon Walls wordlessly, their actual appearances have been hidden from the negative image.

## 7. Conclusion

From the National Southwest Association University and the Democracy Wall in Xidan to the Lennon Walls have bloomed all over the world today, people convert the walls in public spaces as expressive sphere while embracing the pursuit of freedom of speech and the spirit of anti-authoritarianism. Meanwhile, these walls are also challenged and impacted by destructive forces. Accompanying the protests in Hong Kong, the Lennon Walls spontaneously set up by the public surpassed the limitation of geographic space and cohered with the support from all over the world. The jointly created Lennon Walls in Taiwan combine varied social actors: individuals and social groups as the initiators, the governments and universities as potential administrators, and Taiwanese and international participants as the audience. No matter they are legitimate or not, these walls are constantly being defined and developed by their participants.

In addition, the Lennon Walls also perform as links for people to gather through innovation actions in the digital age. Landmarks in cities extend to flash mob events, public discussions and other civic or political activities, evidencing that alternative media can be integrated into the agendas of local social action and mobilization. The walls have become a physical symbol in the public space (Parkinson, 2012, p. 75), and the individual participants become part of the global "Stand with Hong Kong" narrative through these anchor points.

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