

THE PEPE THE FROG IMAGE-MEME IN HONG KONG: VISUAL RECURRENCES AND GENDER FLUIDITY ON THE LIHKG FORUM

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how Pepe the Frog, a cartoon character originally created by American cartoonist Matt Furie, and currently a global digital image-meme of online activism, was adopted and adapted in Hong Kong during the 2019 Anti-Extradition Bill and Law Movement (反對逃犯條例修訂運動; *faan deoi tou faan tiu lai sau ding wan dung*) (hereafter: anti-ELAB Movement) on one of the most prevalent protest platforms, the LIHKG forum (LIHKG 論壇). We combined a computational big data analysis of the posts' metadata and a qualitative analysis of the Hong Kong Pepe image-meme to examine how it contributed to highly emotive and contentious discussions about the future of Hong Kong. The aim is to reveal how activists on this platform framed this imported image-meme to make statements about Hong Kong politics, as well as gender and democracy. The scope of visual content on social media today creates an opportunity for cross-disciplinary collaboration and new methodological approaches that combine a scaling of large quantities of images with representative sampling and theories of online activism. Our theoretical interest aims at documenting how activists reveled in various visual cultures and adopted the image-meme within social media discourse. We are equally interested in identifying the gender representations of these figures and how they drove emotional responses and discussions during the movement's high points. The Anti-ELAB protests and the LIHKG forum were specifically characterized by a large participation of younger women. Alongside the proposition for Hong Kong self-determination, the forum hosted discussions about the role of female activists within the struggle. Since Pepe had previously been adopted by xenophobic alt-right groups and the misogynist "manosphere," we monitored and interpreted recurring Pepe-imagery to find out how normative-conservative, or gender-fluid and emancipatory tropes were used on the LIHKG forum.

Keywords: Hong Kong Anti-ELAB Movement, LIHKG Forum, Pepe the Frog, Image-meme, Gender, Democracy.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Triggered by the introduction of a controversial Fugitive Offenders and Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters Legislation Bill by the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR) in 2019, millions of protesters joined rallies in June 2019 and marked the start of the biggest protest movement in Hong Kong. The purpose of the bill was to establish extradition agreements with Taiwan and mainland China, which left uncertainties about the autonomy of Hong Kong's own jurisdiction and legal system. (Ku, 2020) The bill also led to the overall recognition that it could bring an end to the "One Country, Two Systems" agreement between The People's Republic of China and the Hong Kong S.A.R. Hence, Ku suggests that Anti-ELAB movement could be viewed as an extension of the Umbrella Movement in 2014 in its aim of striving for larger political reforms. The Anti-ELAB movement is a critical event to understand Hong Kong political change and the strategic considerations of protesters were heterogenous and complex. (Lee et al., 2020)

During the Anti-ELAB Movement, the LIHKG forum was the pivotal communication platform of the leaderless movement, a reddit-like forum in which members are anonymous and do not maintain personal pages. To be a verified user who can create threads and leave comments, users have to register with an email address that is accredited by an ISP address or by one of the eight UGC-funded Hong Kong universities. In a newspaper-conducted poll during the protests on July 1, 2019, 55% of the respondents regarded LIHKG as the most influential medium in the movement. (Apple Daily, 2019) The LIHKG forum became the public sphere of the movement, a web-based channel for protesters to seek information, to negotiate on tactics and to provide channels of solidarity within different districts as well between different generations and the radical and moderate factions within the protest. (Lee, 2020, 13) Lee has argued that the forum caters well to a communication of collective sentiments and a bottom-up or spontaneous type of speech, rather than a sustained type of personal influence or leadership. Unlike Facebook, Twitter, or even Reddit, the LIHKG forum does not provide a personal profile page for users. The search function with username only displays the previous threads posted by that user, without showing results of the users' participation in other threads or current status. The communication activities in the LIHKG forum are thus characterized by "a lack of sustained opinion leadership." (Lee, 2021, 6)

For example, the LIHKG users treated the forum as a channel to exchange and spread their promotional materials, including different digital images and stickers that could be used in social media posts as well be printed out for use for urban protest sites. Pepe the Frog became one of the most popular protest-figures or mascots in August 2019 and was

collectively adopted within the Anti-ELAB movement. The frog-figure was recreated by many Hong Kong activists as digital cartoons, drawings, memes, stickers and emoticons, and finally as street art and stuffed animals that were displayed at street rallies. The users of the LIHKG platform had previously created an entire “family” of animal-mascots for netizens to enliven their posts and threads, the most famous being the LIHKG-pig (連豬; *lin zyu*) and LIHKG-dog (連狗; *lin gau*). Pepe the Frog was added to the “family” after some debate about whether this “outsider” animal-figure could be joined with the local animals. Pepe was welcomed and was further recreated on the forum within different genres of protest-art but remained a “cultural outsider.”

The LIHKG forum hosted topics concerning Hong Kong’s self-determination that were considered to be dissident or secessionist statements and were prone to government surveillance or criminalization. However, from our observation, even though it was less driven by traditional forms of leadership or online influencers, Hong Kong activism was also characterized by a split between emancipation and conservatism in its attitudes towards identity and gender politics, which were part of the scope of the movement. In the Hong Kong pro-democracy movements of 2014 and 2019, there had been a large participation of women who gathered daily as frontline-activists or in less confrontational roles. Women were also actively involved in the movement’s digital campaigns and visual cultures - its collectively designed slogans, posters, cartoons, memes and mascots. Some interventions were made in Fall 2019 by feminist scholar Ho Sik-Ying (何式凝), who directly confronted the movement’s tendency towards gender conservatism and sexist attitudes. (Ho, 2019) She criticized the movement for not paying enough attention to women’s roles and for maintaining male-centric discourses of political struggle and brotherhood. She specifically mentioned that the online campaigns revolved around male resentment towards women, such as misogynist hate-speech towards female government officials and wives of the Hong Kong Police Force (HKPF), including popular slogans which were also taken over by female protesters.

The protest culture did however organize rallies devoted to women’s experiences with police violence and sexual violence. For instance, an important #Protesttoo rally took place in Edinburgh Place in Central District on September 27, 2019, and attracted about 50,000 participants. During the rally, female and male protesters came forward to testify, showing solidarity with other victims of police sexual abuse. The Chinese University of Hong Kong student, Sonia Ng, spoke about being sexually abused by a police officer, while a male protester provided an account of being tortured at the San Uk Ling detention center (新屋嶺扣留中心). These cases of sexual abuse became an important theme within the larger

movement and triggered highly emotional responses. (Tong, 2019; Cheng, 2019) During the rally at Edinburgh Place, several slogans and visuals were used, including a feminized Pepe-figure with a bleeding eye-patch, referring to the “EyeforHongKong” (還眼香港; *waan ngaan hoeng gong*) image-meme, which will be detailed later on in this essay.

Dey and others have argued that #metoo rallies and feminist online interventions have provided “counter-narratives” within mainstream political activist discourses. Her article describes how Indian netizens and activists successfully used a hashtag #hokolorob (“Let there be clamor”) to process a sexual harassment case that happened on a college campus in Kolkata. The author emphasizes the importance of testimonies of sexual violence as they are often rendered invisible by cultural prohibitions and amongst the activists themselves. (Dey, 2020, 50) A similar type of clamor concerning sexual violence evinced during the #protesttoo rally and in online forums. The LIHKG platform responded by means of ongoing discussions about the role and treatment of women activists, even though these discussions never took center-stage and never led to a more focused feminist position.

Our in-depth analysis will further reveal how activists visualized gender and democracy on the LIHKG forum by means of the contested image-meme Pepe the Frog. Since LIHKG allows members to be anonymous and select their gender identities as “male” or “female,” it was difficult or nearly impossible for us to track actual statistics about women’s participation on LIHKG itself. As our quantitative analysis showed, the percentage of the gender of users, as defined by themselves, was 71,78% “male” and 28,22% “female.” This insight indicates either that there was a higher engagement from male participants, or that there was a tendency for users to declare themselves as “male.” Media reports have revealed that the forum was also characterized by sexist discourses about both the wives of government officials and about female pro-democracy activists. (Andersen and Leung, 2020) We further scrutinized discourses around gender and democracy through the lens of visual media and the shape-shifting Pepe the Frog.

2 PEPE AS IMAGE-MEME IN THE QUASI-MANOSPHERE OF THE LIHKG FORUM

In understanding the historical lineage of the LIHKG platform in the Hong Kong Golden forum (香港高登討論區), scholars have characterized the gender dynamics of both these forums as “male-centric,” a place for straight male bonding around social issues and debates, which include an abundant sharing of sex talk and pornography. Erni describes the Hong Kong Golden Forum as a casual “lad culture” characterized by a continuing curiosity

toward all things bodily and sexual, a non-contemplative, even unrefined sensibility, and a “social cool” built not on class distinctions or educational attainment, but on street knowledge and popular taste. (Erni, 2017, 35) For instance, the forum hosted several sub-forums devoted to professionally made and amateur porn movies. A second characteristic were threads specifically devoted to sharing, rating, voting and commenting on female bodily and sexual materials such as images of female celebrities and public figures. (Erni, 2017, 49) Hong Kong’s online lad culture traversed to the LIHKG forum, which also developed an openly voyeuristic and ruthless “male gaze” onto female figureheads. During the Anti-ELAB Movement, female politicians and activists testified that they had been extensively harassed online by means of references to their bodies and sexuality. In an article published in Hong Kong Free Press, district councilor Leung Hoi-Ching (梁凱晴) was one of the five female pro-democracy politicians who testified that she experienced sexual harassment by means of reference to her body, especially after posting any photo of herself. As the article details: “Every other message is from a stranger sharing an unsolicited opinion about her appearance.” (Anderson and Leung, 2019) Many times, the male gaze was directed at female pro-establishment politicians or the wives of policemen, but this also happened amongst pro-democracy activists themselves.

The LIHKG forum thus also came to embody a “lad culture” and exhibited similar traits to what in the Western contexts would call a “manosphere”. The forum’s embodiment of male dominance, geek culture and sex chat culture shows similarities to the western manosphere. (Marwick and Lewis, 2017; Nagle, 2017) The manosphere is characterized as a sprawling network of sites and forums for men’s rights and PUA (Pick Up Artistry) that share synergy and became gradually dominated by right-wing and Alt-right groups. While the manosphere is far from a homogenous bloc, the most important common goal within this loosely bound network is ‘to defeat feminism or keep women out of the space.’ (Ging, 2019, 653)

In this regard, even though LIHKG is equally a male-centric platform, it never became a space of unified right-wing politics comparable to the Western Alt-right. Promise Li (2020) from the Lausan Collective and others who shared similar views, have accused LIHKG of being a platform promoting American far-right ideas and xenophobic values while being sympathetic to the policies of Donald Trump. They however have simplified their criticism and neglected the heterogeneity and internal gender and racial dynamics, the negotiations and meaning-making processes happening among different groups of forum users on an everyday basis. For instance, during the anti-ELAB movement, while graffitied slogans did show a defense of a Hong Kong identity, there were

also plenty of them endorsing an embrace of ethnic minorities. One group of Hong Kong “localist” protesters did promote xenophobic hate-speech similar to the American Alt-right, arguing for instance that Hong Kong culture and mainland Chinese culture are distinct and incompatible and cannot be kept within one state. (Lowe and Ortman, 2020, 7) At the same time, other protesters disagreed with the premises of Hong Kong localism and supported ethnically and sexually heterogeneous definitions of Hong Kong identity. Lee has equally argued that there is a lineage in the Hong Kong democracy movement of “radicals” and “moderates” trying to cooperate with each other as well as having heated online debates. (Lee, 2020, 19) In this vein, unlike the Western manosphere where voices of internal dissent are not seen or heard, LIHKG hosts forms of resistance and could only be understood, at most, as a quasi-manosphere.

More importantly, while misogynist extreme-speech can also be observed within campaigns and debates on LIHKG, our focus is on acts of remixing and repurposing a global right-wing figurehead, Pepe the Frog. The widely popular frog which originally appeared as a protagonist of Matt Furie’s independent comic series *Boy’s Club* (2006) has been transnationally adopted and remade within different digital, commodified and/ or political variations overtimes: from the USA’s ‘feels good man’ in early 2010s, to the ‘*shangxin qingwa biaoqing bao*’ (sad frog expression packs) across mainland Chinese platforms in mid-2010s. (de Seta, 2019) The most notorious version of Pepe the Frog would have to be its wide adaption as meme to propagate extreme-right-wing views and to support Donald Trump’s 2016 political campaign on the internet and particularly in the manosphere (Pelletier-Gagnon and Diniz, 2018). It was classified as a symbol of xenophobic racist and misogynist hate-speech by the USA anti-Defamation League in 2016. Nationalist right-wing groups started making use of the meme as “affective currency” to mobilize audiences about their grievances. (Jutel, 2017; Hokka and Nelimarkka, 2020) However, when Pepe the Frog arrived on LIHKG during the Hong Kong Anti-ELAB movement, the forum’s users, also the movement’s supporters, did not welcome and replicate the right-wing representations of Pepe. Instead, being well-aware of its right-wing synergy, LIHKG users intentionally and consciously created their own version of Pepe as gender-fluid and supportive of democracy, as localized but simultaneous “outsider.”

It is impossible to establish a single and coherent Hong Kong history of Pepe the Frog exactly because its history is embedded in power struggles. Internet memes are conceptualized as multilayered cyberplaces that are constantly remixed and remade by internet users. (Pelletier-Gagnon & Diniz, 2021,7; Börzsei, 2013) In this article, we understand Pepe the Frog not only as an internet meme, but also, in Pelletier-Gagnon & Diniz’s term, an image-meme. On LIHKG, Pepe the Frog was never an image “macro”

meme that is merely a static and single computer-generated image with an alterable caption. Instead, the image-meme is produced as a multiplicity of genres and styles such as digital drawings, cartoons, emoticons and stickers. The frog image also became embodied as people carried Pepe-puppets and wore Pepe facemasks within actual protest-sites. In this article, we look at how Pepe the Frog as an image-meme was actively altered, remixed and repurposed by LIHKG users as something gender-fluid and different from its notorious right-wing symbols amongst, also the movement's supporters.

3 METHODS: THREAD POPULARITY AND THE USE OF RECURRING VISUALS AND EMOTICONS

In this study, we combined a computational analysis of the Pepe image-meme on the LIHKG forum with a qualitative method to interpret various themes and how the figure elicited emotional responses. Scholars have argued that the scope and quantity of social media content has become a challenge for qualitative research methods. (Banks and Zeitlyn, 2021, 81-82; Pauwels and Mannay, 2020, 604–605) The data available on LIHKG forum about the politicized figure of Pepe, both the visuals (images and emojis) and the metadata (number of likes/dislikes, date and time of posting, etc.), were indeed massive, so we settled on gathering and analyzing a large set of data using computational methods. The available data on the forum had the following structure: Threads with a specific subject for discussion were searchable through a text-based search. Each thread contained individual posts with each one of them containing text and/or images, as hyperlinks, and/or emojis, also as hyperlinks. This hierarchy of data in the forum demanded the consecutive steps of big data collection, data cleaning and hyperlink extraction in order to download the images, emojis and post metadata.

Although our research focuses on the visuals, it was technically impossible to search the LIHKG forum using images or search only the images independently, without first gathering and filtering the posts containing them. The images on the forum are attached to individual posts in the form of hyperlinks (text leading to a specific website), even though they are visible directly on the threads' webpage. Therefore, threads and then posts had to be downloaded and filtered according to their relevance consecutively in order to access the hyperlinks and then the related images. The same would have applied to emojis, but our analysis of emojis is secondary and does not have the same purpose as the image-analysis. Since there is no Pepe-emoji on the LIHKG forum, we decided to focus first and foremost on Pepe-images. We did also extract the other (non-Pepe) emojis from every post in our final dataset in a data-driven manner. This was for a

secondary analysis and was used to assess the general emotional response in the Anti-extradition Bill protests in relation to Pepe-visuals.

As for the Pepe-image analysis, we initially applied a computer vision method to detect recurring visuals in order to immediately distinguish the most prevalent-recurring images. In this way we found with the “Pepe-Nurse” figure, a photo of a female protester holding a Pepe-poster, which we further analyzed with references to the Hong Kong context. Finally, we continued with a qualitative and contextual analysis of other Pepe-images, this in order to reach deeper and more complex conclusions in regard to Hong Kong gender, identity and democracy.

To more concretely detail our methodological approach, we used the Python programming language and the Anaconda environment to gather and analyze data sets. Initially, we gathered information about all the threads that contained the word “Pepe” and variations of it (specifically: pepe, Pepe, 青蛙, PePe, frog, Frog) from the LIHKG forum’s Application Programming Interface (API). The LIHKG forum’s API allows the programmer to recursively collect data from the forum by specifying the data needed in a piece of code which returns the data after being executed. After that, we made a focused selection based on the date and the title and the content of the posts, specifically threads that dealt with the anti-ELAB movement from February 5, 2019 to November 16, 2020. We collected 14 threads and their posts along with the corresponding metadata using the LIHKG forum’s API². The total threads related to Pepe and the anti-ELAB movement were 23 in total, but only the 14 most popular were finally collected, due to technical obstacles, and these were sufficient to answer the questions of this research. In terms of metadata, the average number of likes for threads related to Pepe was 2802, with an average 5.4 likes per post. After the data cleaning and the extraction of images and emoji hyperlinks, 4057 emojis and 432 images were detected and extracted. As for the emojis, we counted them by type to get an indicator of the emotional response of the users in this discussion contained in the 14 threads.

The images were subjected to a more thorough and complex analysis as they constituted the part of the data where our research is mostly focused on the image-meme of Pepe. We used a computer vision methodological approach to further classify and interpret the recurring images. In past social researches, any supplementary computational approaches were mostly supervised but in our research we applied unsupervised computational methods such as SSIM metric and image fingerprint

² The extracted information was combined with the data that originated from the LIHKG API before the statistical analysis and its results. The latter was necessary because the images and emojis were not provided by the LIHKG forum’s API in a visual form, but their URLs.

extraction, using the perceptual hashing algorithm. (Chan, 2020; Hashemi and Hall, 2019; Joo and Steinert-Threlkeld, 2018; Won et al., 2017)

As a visual tool of propaganda, Pepe started competing with other continuously evolving threads and images to gain attention as communication tactic, and, once adopted by the thread creators, would noticeably surge online. In general, threads with an attached graphic were able to draw a higher degree of participation, compared to those without graphics. From our scraped data collection, we found clear evidence about the impact of these images, and we focused on the representation of gender within these figures. The report found that the top ten most engaging posts with at least one image attached got an overall 11.35 times higher voting score than those that did not use images. The impact of the images was also recognized by the users, as they would add wording such as 「有圖」 (with graphic), 「多圖」 (Many graphics) in the thread title, to attract more viewers. Sometimes, the images attached in the thread are not relevant to the content, but they function separately as click bait and to catch attention. For instance, a thread creator strategically borrows the name and image of the gendered “Pepe Nurse”, an icon that will be scrutinized later, to voice their opinion. They named the thread as 「【突發】Pepe 護士想同大家講」 ([Breaking News] Pepe Nurse has a few words to say...), while the content had nothing to do with the character.

In parallel, we were interested in identifying emotional intensities and how they were driving the image-meme during the movement period. According to a computational-statistical analysis of emojis, the types that were most frequently displayed were negative emotions, i.e., sadness and anger were prevalent in the threads under examination. In particular, the emojis named as “sosad” and “cry” were the two most frequent types of emojis, with “agree” following and then “kill” and “love”. Even if on some occasions these emojis were used ironically, the dominance of negative and sad emojis in the threads was clearly observable. To better interpret these emotions, we created a table to record patterns within the circulated material, mainly focusing on three variables – the function, sentiment and representations of Pepe. These were based on affect theory, specifically Sara Ahmed’s statement that the emotionality of a subject or a collective is crucial in figuring out their desire for activism and relations to power. We borrowed her ideas as a critical lens to look at how LIHKG circulated affective discourses. Ahmed dealt with specific states of affect such as pain, hate, fear, disgust, shame and love.³ (Ahmed, 2014) We adopted her theory

³ In our table we made some modification and “disgust” was deleted from the table. Moreover, considering that Pepe was frequently used as a cynically laughing mascot in both western alt-right movement and in the Hong Kong context, we also included joy in the sentiment category

to design a sentiment-table to classify Pepe-images in the posts of the 14 popular threads.

The use of a sentiment-table along with the quantitative use of emoji statistics indicated a general communication pattern in which people expressed abundant anger and sadness about Hong Kong politics. At the same time, the frog-image started appearing as a means of salvation or emotional relief for the forum users. In order to make this point, we screened out 25 recurring Pepe image-memes and other gendered images, such as Pepe Nurse (*Pepe 護士; Pepe wu si*) which was found to be the most recurring visual in our dataset following the computer vision method we applied. Other recurring images were Sad Pepe, and Pepe with the LIHKG animal family (Or: the LI-family). In this regard we followed a classical approach to indicate how these images depicted activists in relation to tropes of masculinity/femininity, macho-culture/feminism, and gender normativity versus deviation.

4 THE LI-FAMILY AND PEPE THE FROG

As an imported character, Pepe is frequently used to represent Hong Kongers (129 times in 9 threads out of the 416 pictures in the 15 threads) situated both inside and outside the dominant imaginary of activism. Despite becoming a sensation and one of the most popular image-memes in a short time, there were heated debates whether it would be appropriate to include Pepe in the Hong Kong protest culture. For instance, there was a thread in our dataset named “Do not push the Pepe image”, warning that the adoption of Pepe the Frog usually represents white supremacy. The thread gained 614 likes, 270 dislikes and 364 comments. The debate clearly indicated LIHKG users’ awareness of Pepe’s Alt-right history and how they would treat it differently. As indicated in the comments:

Comment 06: 你亞洲人貼一貼pepe 就變左白人至上主義 咩自我審查都要有個限度啦

How could you as an Asian become white supremacist simply by posting a Pepe image? There should be a limit to self-censorship.

Comment 61: 人哋講緊外國戰線 依家種族問題大前提下唔好用Pepe 香港自己圍內點用有所謂

We’re talking about overseas promotion. We should avoid using Pepe in racist-related topics to prevent confusion, while we can feel free to use it in our own discussion.⁴

That said, the distinctive feature of Pepe as an “imported” or even “exotic” figure is important to round out our interpretation. Pepe as a non-local mascot became an important meme in expanding the imagination of democracy. Fran Martin has suggested that imported cultural figures are often constructed as more “desirable” and “exotic” as they would have a different “fragrance” from the local ones. (Martin, 2017, 209) Pepe became desirable to Hong Kongers due to its exotic foreignness or its “outsider-within position.” (Collins, 1990, 12) Pepe maintained its outsider status and would be prevented from becoming a full insider.

Secondly, we observed that Pepe represented gender-fluidity and was able to get rid of its negative associations with the manosphere. For example, there were debates about a favoring of the “masculine” frontline activists, in which *yung mou* (radicalized 勇武) protesters embody a higher class than the moderates *wo lei fei* (“和理非”). The frontline activist would be equated with the nativist or “localist” Hong Konger who holds an essentialist position on identity and also on gender. The “outsider-within position” enabled Pepe to be strategically used to deviate from the frontline stance, to represent moderates and to be gender-fluid.

Practically speaking, Pepe is frequently depicted as the feminine character when representing the Hong Kong protesters alongside the “masculine” LIHKG mascots, including the well-known LI-pig and LI-dog. The first selected image to prove this point (Fig.1) responds to the #Protesttoo campaign and rally mentioned earlier, which was specifically devoted to victims of sexual violence and to express support for female protestors. We can only see the backs of the LI-animals (including Pepe) who are all standing in a line, raising their fists, each with a protest-slogan tattooed on their arms. But for this occasion, the LIHKG dog (the second character from the right), the dominant mascot of the LIHKG forum, is depicted with a “feminine” bow hair accessory. The dog is here assumed to be a female character, even though it is a detail that could easily be missed. Together with the other cartoon characters, the graphic delivers the message that the #Protesttoo campaign unites male and female activists. Perhaps the “deviating” bowtie on an overall male “family” can be seen as a little joke to lighten up the overall dark topic of sexual violence, but we took it as a point of departure in our analysis.

In a second image (Fig. 2), we see a highly expressive crying Pepe depicted with a blood-shot eye, while various other representations of Pepe “in the background” are gender-fluid. This became an important graphic to examine gender deviations in the family. The main figure refers to nurse K.

⁴ See the LIHKG thread 如來佛祖食牛排, 唔好推 Pepe 圖! 唔好推 Pepe 圖! 唔好推 Pepe 圖! 31 May 2020 <https://lihkg.com/thread/2043890/page/1>

a volunteering female first-aider who was shot in the eye during one of the rallies on August 11, 2019, and who became one of the icons of the movement which led to the wide-spread “Eye for Hong Kong” meme. (Ho Kilpatrick, 2019) The other “background” Pepe’s in this graphic include the various “softer” occupations or roles of activists, including *wo lei fei* (和理非). meaning supporters with a more peaceful, rational and non-violence stance, such as first-aiders, the press, netizens, Christians, firemen, social workers, and other people in the community. The press, firefighters and first-aiders were usually people who favored a non-violent stance based on their professional code of conduct. In the graphic, these various characters are tied together in the spirit of “conscience” and their “gender”, as the gender of Pepe overall remains unclear, unmarked or fluid. Pepe is invited into the LI-family and asserts the slogan “ngo dei zung yau loeng zi” (「我地仲有良知」, meaning “we still have conscience”). The identity or conscience of these companions transcends political divisions and any potential internal conflict between radicals *yung mou* (勇武) and moderate activists *wo lei fei* (和理非), as well as between male and female activists.



Figure 1. Digital drawing of LI-family and LI-dog with bowtie

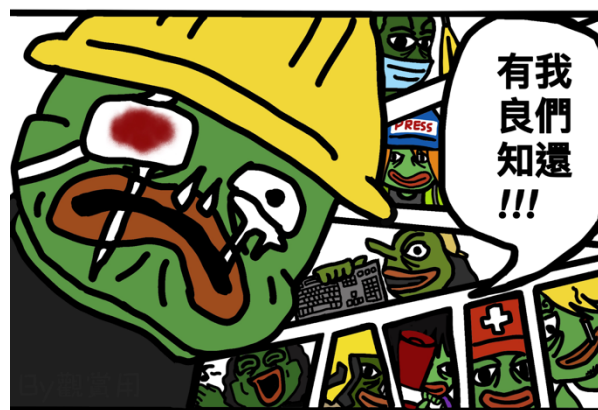


Figure 2. Pepe the Frog as Nurse K with bloody eye-patch.

We also noticed a greater fluidity of Pepe in the representation of protester role. Pepe is often illustrated as the bigger “hands and legs” (手足 meaning

fellow protesters, or friends and families), a hero and savior among all protesters who offers help to other local mascots (see Fig. 3). S/he is crying profusely while cleaning the eyes of Hong Kongers who have been hit with teargas. As in the “Eye For Hong Kong” meme, the crying-Pepe encapsulates the ability to display one’s emotions while still protecting the vulnerable. One graphic is a derivative work from a famous animated movie scene, which depicts a heavily crying-Pepe as a supporter from abroad who aids the protest along with the local mascots. In another graphic Pepe is re-created into the CBS News Correspondent, Ramy Inocencio, a foreign journalist who received protective gear from the locals when covering the protests. Here again, Pepe represents an emotionally affected foreigner who offered a helping hand. Pepe is both localized and gender-fluid, both inside and outside the protest community, s/he is an “outsider-within” that people have faith in.



Figure 3. Pepe the Frog represented as a moderate subsidiary protester *wo lei fei* (“和理非”).

Because Pepe remains an outsider, this is perhaps also the reason why the figure can sometimes be depicted as a villain-character. In several graphics in our collection (Fig.4) he is depicted as a Hong Kong police officer. Pepe remains an outsider who can morph into a cold-blooded aggressor, while the local animal figures are solely illustrated as oppressed Hong Kong protesters, never as “villains”. The local mascots represent Hong Kongers while Pepe is strategically used to express gender fluidity, cultural exoticism or otherness.



Figure 4. Examples of pepe the Frog as aggressor or officer the Hong Kong Police Force

In short, the Pepe image-meme embodies fluid constructs of identity and gender that simultaneously reproduce a dominant perpetrator-victim narrative, and a need to broach such irate and polarized positions. As shown earlier, Pepe is mostly illustrated with an unspecified gender, with no obvious or social recognizable feminine or masculine traits. Pepe is both localized and gender-fluid, both inside and outside the protest community, s/he is an “outsider-within” that people have faith in.

At the same time, in the 416 images from the top 15 threads that we examined, we also found that Pepe was feminized according to a heterosexist view on gender. As argued before, the incident of Nurse K., who joined the protests as a volunteer medic, triggered an expression of solidarity with female activists and “background” or “secondary” activist roles. At the time of this incident, people expressed grave emotions—sadness, frustration and anger—by means of Pepe in 5 of the 15 threads we analyzed. At first glance, these depictions seem to support women and to allow thoughts and feelings about Hong Kong’s assaulted women to circulate online. However, they also forwarded heterosexist constructs of women as the “highly emotional, fragile and vulnerable sex.” For instance, there was also a male activist who was shot on June 12 and was 80% blinded in one eye. (Cheng, 2020) That incident, however, never gained enough engagement in the movement according to our data-set. Moreover, the Pepe

images that became dominant around Nurse K. perpetrated the gender stereotypes that female protesters are the second “beautiful and weaker” sex.

A similarly popular image in our data-set depicts another female nurse who participated in the rally with a constructed eye-patch and holding a Pepe poster. This protester was labeled as “Pepe Nurse” and the meme went viral on LIHKG and across social media as well as traditional Hong Kong media, such as Apple Daily. (梁銘恩, 鄧力行, 麥志榮, 2019) The “beautiful” Pepe-Nurse was adopted in five of the top threads and this was most likely the case because of her appearance. One of most popular LIHKG threads in our data-set was designated to a discussion of a photo of Pepe Nurse, who supposedly is “worth more than a hundred promotional materials.”⁵ (Fig. 5) The thread creator points out that the Pepe Nurse photo already received 187k upvotes on Reddit.⁶ The thread on LIHKG received 4628 likes with 825 comments, including several comments that could be described a “typically sexist”:

Comment 02: 靚女真係大撚晒 Pretty girls do really rank above the average;

Comment 03: 咪就係 用多呢啲宣傳仲好 That’s true. Better to use this type of promotion more

Comment 38: 仲要佢個眼神楚楚可憐咁 完美表達到晒香港人受政治壓逼既慘況 And her puppy eyes perfectly represent the plight of political oppression that Hongkonger face.

Comment 45: 文宣真係要搵靚女 Promotional materials really need pretty girls⁷

Being one of the most popular threads in terms of likes and number of comments among the content related to Pepe, the discussion slanted heavily towards the facial features of the nurse. People discussed her value as a tool of mobilization as a “pretty face” coupled with an exotic international character, Pepe the Frog. They shared the belief that women with a decent appearance would greatly benefit the movement. The essentializing of women’s roles as the “weaker sex” or the “pretty face” of the movement was a discursive strategy about gender commonly used by

⁵See the LIHKG thread 連登臥龍諸葛, 一幅 Pepe +護士姐姐勝過百幅文宣. 15 August 2019 <https://lihkg.com/thread/1473751/page/1>

⁶ See the reddit “protestor in Hong Kong today” 13 August 2019 https://www.reddit.com/r/pics/comments/cpsdwd/protestor_in_hong_kong_today/

⁷See the LIHKG thread 連登臥龍諸葛, 一幅 Pepe +護士姐姐勝過百幅文宣. 15 August 2019 <https://lihkg.com/thread/1473751/page/1>

the nativist wing of the protesters. Choi, Lai and Pan have pointed out that both female and male anti-ELAB activists have tended to naturalize gender biases and justify gender hierarchies in work distribution based on one's biological sex, for example men would be better leaders while women would be the better at public relations. (Choi, Lai and Pan, 2021, 492)



Figure 5. Pepe-Nurse images from our collection.

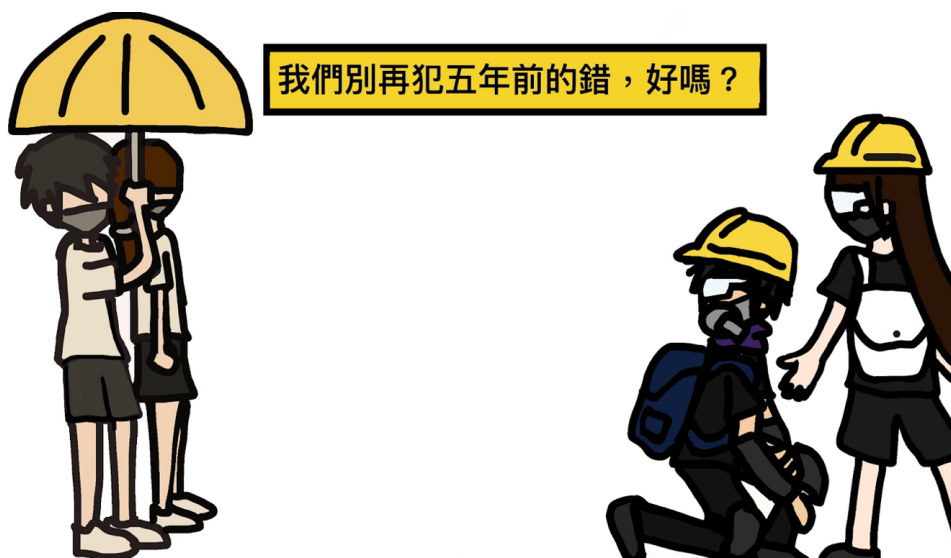


Figure 6. Digital cartoon about the need for hierarchical gender roles, saying "Let's not make the mistake we made 5 years ago, ok?".

Such a “biologicalization” and “naturalization” of activist roles can also be illustrated by another cartoon (Fig.6), in which women are literally depicted as backup protective supporters while men are depicted as frontline fighters. The graphic show gender fluidity and equality during the 2014 Umbrella Movement, while a need for gender difference and clearly delineated roles during the 2019 Anti-Extradition movement. This rhetoric works less to dismiss the relevance of gender, as Choi, Lai, and Pan suggested; rather, it strategically plays with the relevance of gender to create a hierarchy between genders.

But as argued before, the users of LIHKG made room for Pepe the Frog as an “outsider-within” the Li-family, a mascot who in the USA has been discredited and banned as figure of misogynist hate-speech. In Hong Kong, the ambivalent Pepe image-meme sometimes became an emblem of female empowerment and respect for “backstage” roles. At other times the figure was used to the reinforce voyeurism and gender conservatism within the LIHKG forum.

5 CONCLUSION

Pepe-the Frog was a significant image-meme on the LIHKG forum, a platform that was pivotal for activist planning and debates during the 2019 Anti-ELAB movement in Hong Kong. Our research team combined computational and qualitative techniques to scrape a comprehensive dataset, to establish the visual recurrence of graphics and emoticons, and to give a close reading to the popular Pepe-related posts and visuals that had circulated during the movement. By looking at several clusters of Pepe images within our data-set, we found that the Hong Kong image-meme was able to challenge some of the fixed and conservative positions of identity and gender that had defined the USA Alt-right Pepe. Since the Anti-ELAB movement was characterized by a high participation of young women, they were responsible for co-creating the character in order to visualize their own experiences. The predominantly male membership of the LIHKG forum was able to open up to progressive gender politics, a trend which we saw reflected in gender-fluidity and a respect for secondary roles. This type of nuanced or fluctuating positioning of Hong Kong identity, and an acknowledgment of women activist who co-created the narrative, is what differentiates the Western-style Pepe the Frog from the Hong Kong image-meme. The Alt-right meme evolved in a opposite direction when the figure was increasingly hijacked as a tool of resentment.

Hong Kong’s LI-family forum did welcome Pepe the Frog in a gender-fluid manner in such a way that s/he would remain an exotic cultural outsider. The Pepe image-meme was used to show empathy with female victims of police violence and sexual violence when protesters were

encouraged to attend a #Protesttoo rally devoted to this theme, a merger of #Metoo activism and anti-ELAB activism. It was important to note that the Pepe-figure was used to encourage expressions of emotional intensity, to identify with extreme states of hurt and anger and to encourage members to “let their tears flow”. These emotions, along with sadness, were also found to be prevalent by the emoji-type statistical analysis and characterized the general emotional responses of the protesters-users of the LIHKG forum. But finally, the narrative of gender emancipation was fragile and fractured, as our analysis also showed that highly expressive protesters maintained a highly sexualized gaze onto the female body. For instance, one of the most frequently used visuals, entitled “Pepe Nurse,” was used to praise a cute, young women holding a Pepe-sign. The Pepe-Nurse popped up frequently in our collection of visuals and showed that the movement was still invested in a lad culture and veered towards a status quo in gender politics. While the malleability or the fluidity of the Alt-right meme led to racist and misogynist recreations, the Hong Kong meme kept making efforts to promote political correctness, an inclusive identity, and to distinguish itself from the Hong Kong nativists.

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