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On the Necessity of Ritual Sensibility in Public Protest: A Hong Kong Perspective

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Abstract: In Hong Kong, the efficacy of ritualized protest has become an issue of hot debate in recent years. Whereas ritualized protest is a long-term political practice in the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement that has considerable influence, skepticism about it has grown remarkably within the radical faction of the movement. Against this background, this paper aims to offer a theoretical reflection on the role of ritualized protest in the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement. It will take an auto-ethnographic approach to reflect on the material culture of Hong Kong public protests and engage in the recent controversy over ritualized protest. This study shows that although ritualized protest can hardly achieve actual political changes in the short run, ritual sensibility is essential to the promulgation and the passing-on of social and political values. This applies not only to ritualized protests that are largely peaceful, rational, and non-violent but also to militant protests that are open to the use of violence. This emphasis on the underlying importance of ritual sensibility invites both the liberal democratic and the radical factions to introspect whether their own political praxes have portents of formalization and ossification.



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1. Introduction

Political rituals are commonly used as a form of public protests. Taking a knee before starting a sports game, most notably in the NFL and more recently the English Premier League, to protest against police brutality and racism is a typical example. In the recent two decades or so, ritualized protest—public protest in a ritualized form and as a ritual—has been widely discussed by scholars across disciplines. Despite their differences in perspective and methodology, scholars generally agree on the positive functions of ritualized protest in social movements. As we will see in this paper, these positive functions were also evident in the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement. However, the radical faction of the movement, which calls themselves “the valiant” (*yongwu pai/yúhngmóuh paai* 勇武派),¹ has queried the efficacy of ritualized protest in recent years. The main criticism they filed is that ritualized protest is *xingli ruyi/hàhngláiih yùhyih* 行禮如儀/行禮如儀, literally “to perform ritual propriety according to its appropriateness.” After the Umbrella Movement in 2014, the valiant began to employ this phrase to underline the meaninglessness of ritualized protest. For them, it is pointless to repeat the same set of ritual performance without showing a hint of progression. From their perspective, this is exactly what ritualized protests have been doing.

The immediate question raised by this criticism is whether ritualized protest is still productive after the failure of the Umbrella Movement. Whereas the liberal democratic

¹ For the transliteration of Chinese terms, both the Hanyu Pinyin romanization and the Yale romanization of Cantonese will be given when directly related to the Hong Kong context, with the former preceding the latter. Only Hanyu Pinyin romanization will be given in all other cases. Traditional Chinese characters of the terms will be given, followed by simplified Chinese characters if they are different from the traditional ones.

faction tends to defend the necessity of *xingli ruyi* and continue to take ritualized protest as their main strategy, the valiant are increasingly critical of *xingli ruyi* and advocate that confrontational and militant approaches are the only way out. This discrepancy between them has come to the surface in the dispute over the candlelight vigil on the anniversary of the 1989 Tiananmen Square incident (the Tiananmen vigil) in around 2015–2016 and later in the anti-extradition movement in 2019–2020. A deeper question that underlies this discrepancy is what makes a ritualized protest able to perform its functions and exert its political influence.

As a Hong Kong citizen who was born and raised in this city, I have been personally entangled in the rapid social and political changes over the last two decades. I have participated in some of the ritualized protests mentioned in this paper and thus have first-hand experience of them. For this reason, I will employ the method of auto-ethnography to inquire into the material culture of ritualized protests in Hong Kong in this paper. For auto-ethnography, I am referring to the method that utilizes personal experience to describe and interpret cultural patterns with critical reflection on the intersection between the self and the broader social, political, and cultural contexts (Adams et al. 2015, pp. 1–2; Chang 2008, p. 46). Particularly, I will account for the material culture of ritualized protest in Hong Kong based on my personal experience and observations and with reference to media interviews, newspaper reports, and scholarly studies. On this basis, I will further reflect on the theoretical dimensions of the controversy over *xingli ruyi*. My main argument is that ritual sensibility is the core of ritualized protest that is crucial to the renewal of the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement. Despite the negative label put on it, *xingli ruyi* is essential to the vitality of the entire movement. Rather than avoid *xingli ruyi*, ritualized protests should ensure that it follows the spirit of *xingli ruyi*. In other words, if a ritualized protest is able to cultivate ritual sensibility and promote political virtues, it will likely have an important share in the future of a social movement.

2. Defining Ritual

Since ritualized protest is the key subject matter of this study, it is necessary to clarify what a ritual is. There were numerous attempts to define ritual. Unfortunately, those definitions bring further confusion rather than clarification in many cases, for they more than often disagree with one another. However, a definition is inevitable for the clarity of our discussion. This definition cannot be too narrow or too broad. A narrow definition may exclude too many qualified candidates, whereas a broad definition may lead to confusion. Both are less than helpful to the analysis of the current study.

Some scholars have offered narrow definitions of ritual. For instance, Gregory W. Schneider defines ritual as “a set of actions that embody a conversation among participants in a more or less chaotic performance that attempts to find order in society and the universe beyond” (Schneider 2008, p. 15). Besides, Dániel Z. Kádár further highlights the relational aspect of ritual and define it as “a formalized and recurrent act [. . . that] reinforces/transforms the interpersonal relationships” (Kádár 2017, p. 55). On the other hand, instead of focusing on the relationships between the participants, Lan Qing is concerned about the relationship between two kinds of mental existence: that without material support (ME1) and that with (ME2). In turn, Lan defines rituals as “acts aiming to change the relationship between the ME1 and ME2” (Lan 2018, p. 11). While relationality is undoubtedly an important aspect of ritual, the above definitions have some major limitations. Contrary to Schneider’s and Kádár’s definitions, not every ritual explicitly expresses a conversation or directly affects an interpersonal relationship. Taking a knee at the beginning of an NFL or Premier League game is an example. Contrary to Lan’s definition, not all acts aiming to change the relationship between the spiritual and the physical worlds are rituals. For instance, private prayer is rarely considered as a ritual, though it may probably aim to change God’s relationship with the world. More importantly, ritual does not necessarily aim to change the relationship between the spiritual and the mundane. For instance, it is arguable that commemoration ceremonies for the anniversary of the 9/11

attacks are rituals. In brief, although these narrow definitions are somehow illuminative and refreshing, they have not fully considered the various aspects of ritual.

On the other hand, Jan Platvoet has provided an overly broad definition, for he attempts to include as many previous definitions as possible. According to Platvoet, a ritual is

that broad range of forms of social interaction between humans, and from one or several humans to other, real or postulated, addressable beings which is marked by a sufficient number of the distinctive traits and functions set out below to merit classification as “ritual” conceived as a fuzzy, polythetic category of the “family resemblance” type. (Platvoet 1995, p. 27)

This definition is too lengthy and clumsy to comprehend. More importantly, it can hardly clarify what ritual is and is not. However, it has inspired Jan Snoek to propose a heuristic and practical definition. His definition consists of four classes: Aristotelian, fuzzy, polythetic, and fuzzy polythetic. Aristotelian classes refer to those attributes that must be present in all rituals. Snoek argues that this class alone is insufficient, for it needs other auxiliary features to distinguish a ritual from other practices. Hence, he suggests that one must make use of fuzzy and polythetic classes. The former “is a class of objects with a continuum of grades of membership,” whereas the latter is “based on characteristics that may or may not be present.” Finally, fuzzy polythetic classes consist of the features of both fuzzy and polythetic classes (Snoek 2006, p. 4). Snoek’s definition is important because it rectifies Platvoet’s problem while retaining his insight. It includes various characteristics that often, but not always, feature a ritual while giving us a clear sense of what elements are essential to ritual. More recently, Ronald L. Grimes employs a similar strategy to give a minimal definition: “Ritual is embodied, condensed, and prescribed enactment” (Grimes 2013, p. 196). Like Snoek, Grimes adds a list of family characteristics of rituals on top of this formal definition (p. 194).

In this paper, I will take Snoek’s definition as the framework in defining ritual (Snoek 2006, p. 11), for it designates the scope of ritual with a flexible boundary that is neither too rigid nor too loose. First, a ritual is essentially a *culturally constructed enactment that marks off from the daily routines* and has its *performers as its audience*. Second, to some extent, it must *channel the emotion* and *guide the cognition* of the participants and the audiences. It must also have a *definite form*, conform to a *conventional style*, and be *prescribed and governed by rules*. Third, it typically creates *liminality* that aims to bring about changes in relationships among participating social groups and/or between the world within the ritual and the world beyond. It is usually *specific to a certain time and/or space* and consists of some of these characteristics: *collective, multimedia, purposeful, and repeated*. Finally, it also contains some of the following fuzzy features: *standardized, religious, repetitive, symbolic, and communicative*. These points set the criteria of what counts as a ritual in this paper. A ritualized protest, then, is a protest that fits in with the above set of criteria.

3. Functions of Ritual in Public Protests

As mentioned at the beginning, the functions of ritualized protests have been widely studied in these two decades or so by intellectuals of various disciplines. Four major functions can be identified in these scholarly analyses. First, ritualized protest may strengthen the morale of protesters by enhancing *solidarity* and providing a sense of *belonging and identity*. Drawing on Émile Durkheim’s view that ritual has the potential power to produce solidarity by producing and reproducing symbolic goods to social order, sociologists Steven Pfaff and Yang Guobin delineate the double character of political ritual in their study of the role of political commemorations in Eastern Europe and China (Pfaff and Yang 2001, pp. 541–55). While political ritual can idolize the state and inspire uncritical loyalty through its symbolic power to create a collective sense of political identity, it may also create occasions for dissenting political subcultures to create and renew commitment, identity, and solidarity among the dissidents. Besides, studying the Basque National Freedom Movement, political scientists Jesus Casquete illustrates how ritualized protest has

revitalized the movement by unleashing what Durkheim calls “collective effervescence” (Casquete 2006, p. 53). In particular, he shows that ritualized protest forged a collective identity that reinforced group solidarity and fostered a sense of commitment (pp. 45–46). In addition, in his study of the Orange parades in Northern Ireland, anthropologist Dominic Bryan claims that ritualized protest proffers a sense of belonging and identity by enabling individual participants to relate themselves to the wider community and its leaders (Bryan 2000, p. 178). Sian Lazar, another anthropologist who studies the street protests in El Alto, Bolivia and Buenos Aires, Argentina, also states that ritualized protest can strengthen the symbolic power of public protests and create a synergy among different protest movements (Lazar 2015, pp. 245, 248–49).

Second, ritualized protest may create a *liminal space* for resistance. Apparently, this is linked to Victor Turner’s theory. In his study of the Tibetan Protest in Lhasa in late 1987, sociologists Ron Schwartz observes that ritual elements taken from Buddhist spiritual practices achieved what Turner calls *communitas* and created a liminal space that helped the Tibetans overcome their objective powerlessness (Schwartz 1994, pp. 20–21). This liminal space also prefigured future liberation and symbolically communicated the political demands of the Tibetans. Pfaff and Yang also refer to Turner and assert that the symbolism of ritual makes room for dissension expression by temporarily rendering power relations transparent (Pfaff and Yang 2001, pp. 541–42). Bronislaw Szerszynski, another sociologist who studies environmental protests with reference to Turner’s theory of liminality, comments that ritualized protest prefigures an ideal society that suspends present social rules. This enables the participants to connect the concrete world in which we are living with the abstract world in which we ought to live (Szerszynski 2002, p. 56). Szerszynski further contends that ritualized protest carves out a limen—a peculiar world within the present world—that bears particular schemes of meaning and modes of experiences. In this limen, space and time are arranged in a different order to create and define situations that structure the surrounding environment. It then validates protest actions for the participants with the experience of moving through this limen (pp. 62–63). In Bryan’s terms, this limen provides a space for those who commit themselves to it to resist and negotiate (Bryan 2000, p. 176). Furthermore, political scientists Mie Scott Georgsen and Bjørn Thomassen consider that the Maidan protest movement in Ukraine in 2013–2014 was itself a social drama and a “liminal hotspot” (Georgsen and Thomassen 2017, p. 199). In particular, the building of barricades as a ritualized protest symbolized a breaking away from the existing order and daily lives and constituted a liminal situation (p. 203). This liminal situation created a sense of unity that characterized *communitas* where mutual amity arose and existing differences were suspended (pp. 203–4). It also subverted all pre-existing structures and reconstructed the representation of reality (p. 211).

Third, ritualized protests may *exemplify democratic values* in public spaces. Religious ethicist David Melville Craig argues that political ritual in the Civil Rights Protests during the 1950s and the 1960s demonstrated a wider type of public reason that created opportunities for the public to reflect on the common good (Craig 2007, p. 164). The use of ritual in protests effectively displayed existing social borders by evoking powerful sentiments and intuitive responses (p. 165). It also provided reasons for social change by creating spaces for the re-enactment of democratic values and the debate of public norms (p. 167). In their study of the popular protests in Switzerland back to the 1830s, historians Joachim Eibach and Maurice Cottier also argue that creative citations of traditional rituals helped protestors gain social acceptance (Eibach and Cottier 2013, p. 1024).

Finally, ritualized protest may also *motivate direct political actions*. In a study of street demonstrations in Mexico City during 2011–2012, sociologists María Inclán and Paul D. Almeida contend that ritualized protests “provide an experiential resource for individuals to gain the desire to participate in reactive-type protest events” (Inclán and Almeida 2017, p. 69). Besides, in a study of the political resistance of modernization in a rural town in Hida, Japan since the Meiji period, anthropologist Scott Schnell suggests that ritual can sometimes have an instrumental role in political action by serving as a vehicle

that motivated direct political—sometimes violent—actions against perceived injustice (Schnell 1995).

4. Ritualized Protests in Hong Kong Pro-Democracy Movement (1990–2014)

In the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement, ritualized protest has been an important strategy of social movement in the recent three decades. The Tiananmen vigil is arguably the most significant ritualized protest in Hong Kong and is thus an important point of reference for the use of ritual in the pro-democracy movement. The vigil has been taking place annually on the night of 4 June since 1990 to commemorate the Tiananmen Square incident. Its form is highly liturgical, consisting of programmes such as laying of flowers, lighting of torch, eulogy, a moment of silence, singing of songs, sharing and video, and manifesto recitation. According to my observation as a participant, it is quite similar to a Protestant service under the Reformed tradition. This is not surprising as the founding chairperson of the Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements of China (the Alliance)—the organizer of the Tiananmen vigil—Szeto Wah (1931–2011) was a Christian. Apart from the vigil, the 1 July march is another important reference of political ritual in the pro-democracy movement. The march is held annually on 1 July after around 500,000 citizens took to the streets on 1 July 2003 against the administration of Tung Chee-hwa,² the then Chief Executive of Hong Kong, and the imminent national security legislation. Since the march in 2003 successfully led to the withdrawal of the National Security Bill and Tung's later resignation in early 2005, a protest march has been held on 1 July annually to call for democratic reforms. Although the march in itself does not take an obvious ritual form, its repeated and standardized forms share some basic patterns of a ritual procession (Bosco 2016, p. 391). As a participant, I would describe the march as a political festive parade that demonstrates a plurality of political voices. The 1 July march and the Tiananmen vigil have become the two most important political activities of the pro-democracy movement since the early 2000s (Lee and Chan 2011, pp. 1–5).

Other than the Tiananmen vigil and the 1 July march, occupation movement is another common form of ritualized protest in Hong Kong during the late 2000s and the early 2010s. Two early examples were the protests against the demolition of the Edinburgh Place Ferry Pier in 2006 and of the Queen's Pier in 2007 out of conservation concerns. Sit-in, protest camps, hanging protest banners, shouting slogans, hunger strikes, blocking demolition workers, and chaining the protesters themselves up are the major tactics employed in these two protest movements (see Chan 2017, p. 29). A similar form of protest took place in 2011–2012, in which a group of citizens occupied the plaza beneath the HSBC headquarters in Central and set up protest camps for eleven months to echo the Occupy Wall Street movement (see Tremlett 2016). Although the enactments in those protest movements were, generally speaking, not typically ritual, they share most features of a ritual as defined in this paper. Thus, they can be interpreted as ritual events, as suggested by religious scholar Paul-François Tremlett (2016, p. 1165). A much larger version of occupation protest was the anti-national education movement in August–September 2012, which demanded the government to withdraw its introduction of the revised Moral and National Education (MNE) curriculum (see Veg 2017, pp. 335–39; Wong and Wright 2020, pp. 1747–48). Hundreds of students and other protesters took turns to stay overnight in the protest camps set up at the East Wing Forecourt of the Central Government Offices (a.k.a. Civic Square). I spent a night in a protest camp. From my experience, the Forecourt became a liminal space between and betwixt the social structure that epitomized the spirit of the movement, that is, to fight for the freedom of conscience for the next generation. Besides pressing the government, this occupation movement also brought about a revitalizing experience that affirmed the possibility of overcoming the existing power structure. On 7 September, over 100,000 citizens attended the peaceful assembly around the Forecourt. I was also there and perceived a strong sense of solidarity. The major protest tactics were

² All protest statistics in this paper are in accordance with the organizers' official announcements as they are the most widely cited figures.

similar to the previous occupation protests. Nonetheless, the protesters employed the gesture of crossed arms together to signal their refusal to the imposition of the MNE curriculum, which was accused of brainwashing (Wong and Wright 2020, p. 1750). The collective makings of this political gesture demonstrated the rituality of the movement more explicitly. This occupation movement was partially successful as the government temporarily withdrew its proposal of the MNE curriculum. However, it was thus far the last ritualized protest that has some actual political achievements.

Besides these occupation movements, a more obvious form of ritualized protest took place earlier as part of the anti-Hong Kong Express Rail Link movement from late 2009 to early 2010. The most remarkable ritual was the two prostrating walks that imitated the Tibetan pilgrims and the anti-WTO protest in Hong Kong in 2005 by Korean farmers (Chan 2017, pp. 31–32). The first walk encircled the LegCo building for three days on 16–18 December 2009, and the second one took place in each of the five constituencies for four days on 5–8 January 2010. The participants of the two walks mainly consisted of university students and youngsters in their twenties. In each of these walks, the protesters lined up in a single row and proceeded slowly. The walk was performed in 26-step cycle: The participants knelt together for every 26 steps to symbolize the length of the Hong Kong Express Rail Link, which is 26 kilometers. The leading protester in the front held a banner that expressed the theme of the protracting walk: against the Express Rail Link. The protester at the rear was a drummer who provided the beat that directed the procession. All protesters kept silent, and the only sound was from the drum. This created a solemn atmosphere that is in line with the facial expressions of the protesters. The solemnness of the procession generated a sense of ritual (pp. 32–33). The protesters also held some grains that, according to one of the protesters, represent both public funds and the Choi Yuen Tsuen village, which was forced to be demolished because of its overlap with the Express Rail Link's planned tracks in their hands (Itisironic 2009, 1:10–1:46). Although the movement failed to stop the Express Rail Link construction eventually, the prostrating walk reappeared as a ritualized protest during the Umbrella Movement in 2014.

The Umbrella Movement, which was caused by Beijing's decision to prescribe a pre-screening of Hong Kong Chief Executive candidates on 31 August 2014 and consisted of road occupations in Admiralty, Mong Kok, and Causeway Bay, was rich in ritual and symbolic materials. Anthropologist Joseph Bosco has studied some ritual elements and religious symbolism employed in the Umbrella Movement, including the installation of a mini Kuan Kung shrine and a mini chapel in the "occupied" area of Mongkok, funeral offerings to then Chief Executive C. Y. Leung, political slogans in the form of Daoist charms, and the widespread use of yellow umbrella as a defining symbol (Bosco 2016, pp. 382–89). For Bosco, what is important is not whether the protesters were inspired by religious commitments but how they sought rituals and symbols to express and communicate their political demands (p. 383). The most important function of such rituals and symbols is to create a sense of the sacred (p. 391). Having visited the occupied sites, I would add that the establishment of sacred sites and the use of religious symbols have reinforced the rituality of the movement. These elements transformed the "occupied" areas from familiar and mundane streets into political theatres that conveyed a sense of holiness. In addition, communication scholar Lo Wai-han also indicates some less obvious rituals such as collective singing and open lectures in the occupied area (Lo 2016b, p. 806). As political scientist Samson Yuen argues, these ritualized protests in specific places have contributed to the formation of distinctive place-based collective identity and the stimulation of solidarity in the early stage of the movement (Yuen 2018). However, the concurrent and subsequent dispute over strategy among the protesters has weakened this solidarity and finally led to lasting division.

5. The Rise of the Valiant and Controversy over Ritualized Protests

The Umbrella Movement in 2014 is arguably a turning point of the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement. Its failure in achieving any actual political changes created room for

the rise of the valiant, who advocate a more radical approach to political protest. While the valiant are often associated with the localists (*bentu pai/búntóu paai* 本土派), who advocate Hong Kong's separation from mainland China, not all of them embrace the localist agenda. Rather, the hallmark of the valiant is their appeal to militant and anarchist actions such as violent clashes with the police. This stands in contrast to the moderate and liberal democratic faction of the movement, which is opposed to the use of violence in protests. This faction is later dubbed as the *he li fei/wòh léih fēi* 和理非 (literally the "peaceful, rational, and non-violent"). Although the valiant have already been active before the Umbrella Movement, their confidence and support have increased considerably afterward. The Mong Kok civil unrest (a.k.a. the Fishball Revolution) in February 2016 revealed the increasing sympathy towards the valiant within the pro-democracy movement. This unrest was a major political protest between the Umbrella Movement and the recent anti-extradition movement. Unlike the Umbrella Movement, it resorted to violent means and was defined as a riot by the government (see Lo 2016a, pp. 195–221). It is noteworthy that one of the leaders of the unrest, Edward Leung Tin-kei, received more than 15% of the votes in a by-election of the LegCo 19 days after the unrest, which was much higher than expected. Although Leung failed to win a LegCo seat, this signified an increasing acceptance of the valiant within the pro-democracy movement.

The valiant believe that militant actions and direct clashes with the authorities are necessary to achieve political changes. On the contrary, peaceful, rational, and non-violent protests are at best auxiliary and at worst detrimental to the movement. After the Umbrella Movement, some radical protesters—most notably university students—began to criticize ritualized protest for being *xingli ruyi* (to perform ritual propriety according to its appropriateness). They initially employed this phrase to accuse the Tiananmen vigil of being a formalized and ossified political ritual. In an interview, the then external secretary of the Student Union of the Chinese University of Hong Kong Lee Man-yiu argued that the Alliance had employed the same ritual set without a will to achieve actual political advancements (HK Apple Daily 2017, 0:47–1:06). In fact, the Hong Kong Federation of Students (HKFS)—the most iconic student organization in Hong Kong—has stopped joining the vigil on its behalf since 2015 and officially parted ways with the Alliance, its long-term partner, in 2016. The student unions of local universities have also ceased to join the vigil since 2015. To some extent, this schism of the pro-democracy movement has testified to increasing disbelief in and discontent with ritualized protest. Apart from the Tiananmen vigil, the valiant has also criticized other formalized protests, most prominently the 1 July march, of being *xingli ruyi*.

Communication scholars Francis L. F. Lee and Joseph M. Chan are two leading local intellectuals in the scholarly discussion of ritualized protests. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that their focus is not on ritual as defined in this paper but what they called "ritualistic protests," which generally refers to "a type of collective actions that is relatively stable and repetitive" (Lee and Chan 2011, p. 12). According to their study, the major contribution of what they call ritualistic protests, as exemplified by the Tiananmen vigil and the 1 July march, is their shaping of the collective identity and memory of Hong Kong people (p. 207). Based on an earlier focus group study, they found that the most salient function of the 1 July march was to give the participants a feeling and experience of having social and political influences when they came together as a collective actor (Lee and Chan 2008, p. 93). However, some participants realized that the power of these protests was rather limited and largely depended on the changing social and political environment (pp. 94–95). Moreover, the Chinese government might regulate and restrict the impact of ritualistic protest by employing a normalization strategy that rendered such a protest "just another protest" (Lee and Chan 2011, p. 120). Lee and Chan's subsequent studies show that ritualistic protests can transmit collective memory of important political events, such as the Tiananmen Square incident. This transmission of memory is important to the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement as a whole (see Lee 2012; Lee and Chan 2013). My personal experience and observation echo Lee and Chan's account. I would add that the effectiveness of the 1

July march in this respect has shrunk gradually. A possible reason for this is the lack of a focused and clear-cut theme. This has made the march become an annual political rite in more or less the same form without any precise purposes. The Tiananmen vigil has performed better in this regard because it has a precise theme and purpose.

The above discussion shows that, despite having its limitations, *xingli ruyi* is not necessarily negative and does perform some positive political functions. Lee and Chan's studies also indicate that even "ritualistic" protests can reinforce the sense of belonging and identity among the protesters. Besides, to a certain extent, both the Tiananmen vigil and the 1 July march can create a liminal space for continuing resistance and embody democratic values. The various political rituals employed in the Umbrella Movement also perform similar functions to sustain unity and solidarity. Furthermore, the ritualized protests before and during the Umbrella Movement have also inspired citizens to pursue democracy and social justice. This awakening function was testified by the scale of the recent anti-extradition movement. Given these positive functions of ritualized protest, why did the valiant claim that ritualized protests, which are *xingli ruyi* from their perspective, were stumbling stones to the pro-democracy movement? Lee and Chan point out that the prevalence of ritualistic protest in the pro-democracy movement during the 2000s and early 2010s "implies the lack of radicalization on the part of protesters and activists" (Lee and Chan 2011, p. 206). This may partly explain why the valiant despise ritualistic protest. The same case applies to the Umbrella Movement, which has utilized many political rituals but eventually failed to achieve any actual political changes. Moreover, to some extent, the ritual facet of the Umbrella Movement resembled the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989 in Beijing (see Lagerkvist and Rühlig 2016; Lou 2017). Therefore, it is understandable that, like the Tiananmen vigil, the use of political ritual as a protest strategy has become a major site of disputation between the valiant and the *he li fei*. Besides, for the valiant and particularly the localists, the Tiananmen vigil promotes a kind of pan-Chinese patriotism (*da Zhonghua zhuyi/daaih Jūngwàh jyúyih* 大中華主義/大中华主义) that is irrelevant to Hong Kong and demonstrates the ritualization of protests that is replete with banal and old-fashioned symbolism (Cheng and Yuen 2019, pp. 431–32). Thus, the resemblance between the Umbrella Movement and the Tiananmen Square protests might result in a negative impression of ritualized protests among the valiant.

6. Ritualized Protests in the Anti-Extradition Movement (2019–2020)

The controversy over ritualized protests goes on in the anti-extradition movement that broke out in 2019. During the movement, ritualized protests continued to play an important role, especially among the *he li fei*. On the other hand, the valiant remain critical to ritualized protest and have employed confrontational and anarchist measures as their primary strategy. For them, all sorts of ritualized protests, just like the Tiananmen vigil and the 1 July march, are merely *xingli ruyi*. They believe that such protests cannot bring any pressure to Beijing and the Hong Kong government and are thus pointless. Interestingly, despite their strong disagreement with the *he li fei* with regard to strategy, the valiant generally uphold the solidarity between the *he li fei* and the valiant (*he yong bufen/wòh yúhng bātfān* 和勇不分), which is a salient theme of the movement.

Among the various forms of ritualized protest in the movement, two are particularly worth discussing. The first one is the *formation of human chains*. It first appeared in the movement as the Hong Kong Way on 23 August 2019, the 30th anniversary of the Baltic Way (see Choi 2020, p. 280; Holbig 2020, p. 332). Although much smaller in scale, the Hong Kong Way produced a similar impact on peacefully conveying the spirit of liberty and justice. On that night, the human chain extended from the two shores of Victoria Harbour to other parts of Hong Kong Island and Kowloon along the three original lines of the Mass Transit Railway (MTR) network. Separate chains were also formed at various locations, most notably on the top of the Lion Rock, to echo the main chain. The choice of locations was highly symbolic, with the three original MTR lines representing the social and economic development of Hong Kong and the Lion Rock representing the spirit of

Hong Kong people. For the participants, the Hong Kong Way expressed solidarity and the determination to fight for freedom and democracy. As a fellow citizen who witnessed but did not take part in the Hong Kong Way, I could feel its power, and my heart was deeply connected with the protesters. My Facebook page was also flooded with photos and information about the protest. This form of ritualized protest is thereby not ineffective in promulgating political values and inspiring people. From September to December 2019, dozens of human chains of different scales were formed, mostly by secondary school students. It has been sporadically used as a protest tactic in 2020, both within and outside Hong Kong.

The second noteworthy form of ritualized protest is the *singing of the song "Glory to Hong Kong"* in shopping malls and other public spaces. "Glory to Hong Kong" is commonly acknowledged as the most influential song composed during the Anti-Extradition Movement. It was first sung publicly and collectively on 6 September 2019 at the Prince Edward MTR station as a part of the sit-in protest. The first public singing of the song in a shopping mall was on 9 September, with some protesters shouting political slogans after singing the song. On the next day, some attendances of the World Cup Qualifying home game against Iran sang the song together during the game. Two days later, on 12 September, groups of citizens gathered in various shopping malls all over Hong Kong and formed ad-hoc public choirs. From that time onwards, hundreds of similar singing protests of different scales have been organized under the name of "Sing with You" (*he ni chang / wòh néih cheung* 和你唱) in different public spaces, mostly in shopping malls. Since then, it has become a recurrent ritualized protest. According to my observation, these singing protests have created a strong sense of solidarity that connected all those who identified themselves with the "five demands" efficaciously.³ In addition, they have converted the shopping malls from a place of everyday life into a liminal space of resistance. Sociologist Susanne Y. P. Choi (2020, p. 280) also suggests that these ritualized protests have transformed the quintessential symbol of modern consumerism into political spaces.

While the *he li fei* keep on employing political rituals in the anti-extradition movement, the valiant keep on contending that these ritualized protests are *xingli ruyi*, which are only for complacency and will not help achieve the five demands. Although these two factions have generally maintained external solidarity throughout the anti-extradition movement and showed a certain extent of mutual understanding, they parted ways with each other in tactics and rationales. In any case, this solidarity has not made the valiant have more positive regard for ritualized protests. Rather, they insist that the movement must get rid of the *xingli ruyi* model. For them, the movement needs to free itself from such conventions and turn to direct and confrontational action in order to make real changes. Critiques from local key opinion leaders have clearly demonstrated this mentality (see, for example, Song 2019; Cheng 2020).

Interestingly, although the valiant are skeptical of ritualized protest, traits of political ritual could be identified in their militant protests. Not only did they tolerate the existence of political ritual in the movement out of solidarity, but they also unconsciously employed some subtle forms of ritual. Examples include the use of the black bloc tactic and the repeated sequence of gestures and actions like setting up roadblocks, burning debris, shielding with umbrellas, throwing bricks and Molotov cocktails, etc. Although these were mainly tactics out of practical concerns, they have no lack of ritual effects. To take the black bloc tactic as an instance, while it is obvious that black blocs can conceal the wearers' identities and offer protection against tear gases, they bear some cultural heritage. The use of the black bloc tactic may perhaps be too distant from its origin in the anarcho-punk tradition and the leftist demonstrations in West Germany during the 1980s (see Dupuis-Déri 2014, pp. 21–51). However, by employing the black bloc tactic, the valiant share the same

³ The five demands of the anti-extradition movements are full withdrawal of the extradition bill, establishment of an individual commission of inquiry into alleged police brutality, retraction of the characterization of the protests as riots, release and exoneration of arrested protesters, and universal suffrage for LegCo and Chief Executive elections.

dress code with the *he li fei*, which was changed from white to black since the fourth march of the anti-extradition movement on 16 June 2019—in which a record-breaking of around two million people took to the street—to protest against government’s suppression and police brutality (see [Stand News 2019](#)). Thus, by taking the black bloc tactic, the valiant have, as a matter of fact, demonstrated the solidarity between them and the *he li fei*. More importantly, besides giving valiant protesters the necessary protection, the black bloc tactic has also strengthened the sisterhood and brotherhood among them. While the protesters literally did not know one another thanks to their “full gear,” their black clothing was like a uniform that bound them together. To a certain extent, the black bloc tactic has functioned like a ritual that marked off the protesters from their daily routines.

Furthermore, even violent protests during the anti-extradition movement contain some ritual elements. Although the valiant seem to have taken a completely different track from the *he li fei*, the patterns of their resistance were actually akin to the *he li fei*. Like the Tiananmen vigil and the political rituals employed during the anti-extradition movement, the valiant have more or less repeated the same set of actions in most of their protests during the movement, as stated in the above paragraph. These repeated actions have displayed some traits of a political ritual. Although the valiant believed that their confrontational actions could exert more pressure upon the authorities, as a matter of fact, these actions did not result in any actual political achievements. Seen in this way, except for the use of violence and vandalism, their actions did not differ from the *he li fei* greatly. Most of their protests repeated a similar sequence: gathering, taking actions that cause the breach of peace, setting barricades and arraying, confronting the police, fleeing, rallying for subsequent confrontations, and finally retreating. Unless the valiant believed that their actions would overcome the police force, their protests also demonstrated a sense of ritual, even a sense of *xingli ruyi*.

Georgsen and Thomassen’s study of the Maidan protest movement in Ukraine in 2013–14 may shed some light here. Borrowing the ritual theory of Arnold van Gennep and also Turner, Georgsen and Thomassen comment that the setting up of barricades marks the separation stage of a social drama, which amplifies the polarities of the protestors and the police ([Georgsen and Thomassen 2017](#), p. 202). This action thus “assumes a pivotal role in ritualized protest and can be considered indicators of liminal thresholds” that mark a break in the existing order and the daily routine (p. 203). In this liminality, “hitherto separate individuals actually start to feel and act like a collective body with a sense of shared aims and goals, even worldviews, and become something much more than a social aggregate” (p. 204). This liminal situation aroused mixed emotions, including “fear and courage, anxiety and hope, grief and joy, boredom and excitement, destruction and reconstruction, exclusion and inclusion, division and unity” (p. 206). It also creates a feeling of unity that characterizes *communitas* in which mutual amity arises and existing differences are suspended (pp. 206–7). Although there are plenty of differences between the Maidan protest movement in Ukraine and the anti-extradition movement in Hong Kong, Georgsen and Thomassen’s analysis is in many respects applicable to reflecting on the valiant protests in Hong Kong.

7. Revisiting *Xingli Ruyi* with a Confucian Understanding of *Li* and *Yi*

The above discussion shows that ritualized protests were vividly present in the anti-extradition movement, at least among the *he li fei*. Even the militant and anarchist protests of the valiant were not completely free of ritual elements. Despite its lack of direct and immediate political outcomes, ritualized protest has played an important part in maintaining the solidarity of the protesters, creating liminal spaces of resistance, and promulgating democratic values in the anti-extradition movement, just as in other movements of different times and spaces. In this regard, *xingli ruyi* has its political significance. The crucial question is whether *xingli ruyi* does more harm than good to the entire social movement. For the valiant, this phrase is almost always coined with negative connotations because the performance of ritual propriety (*xingli*) according to its appropriateness (*ruyi*) has failed

to bring about actual political advancements. According to this view, the yardstick for political effectualness is whether an action can result in political changes. However, making a judgment on this is not as simple and direct as it may seem, for the relationship between an action and its results is complicated and dynamic. More importantly, judging the efficacy of political action by its short-term achievements is rather hasty and shortsighted. Social change has dimensions deeper than the remodeling of the form of government. These dimensions, including alterations in cultural symbols, social norms, and value systems (*Encyclopaedia Britannica* 2020), are interconnected with changes in political structures. Therefore, it is important to study what influences *xingli ruyi* may have in these dimensions. Since the notions *li* 禮/礼 (ritual propriety) and *yi* 儀/仪 (appropriateness) are deeply rooted in Confucian philosophy, it is necessary to revisit *xingli ruyi* through the lens of a Confucian understanding of ritual propriety.

Those who criticize ritualized protests of being *xingli ruyi* assume that *li* and *yi* have little social and political contributions. However, Confucian understandings of *li* and *yi*, which constitute the essence of *xingli ruyi*, may show a different picture. According to Kurtis Hagen, the core of Confucius' conception of *li* lies not in external norms but in internal dispositions. What matters most is ritual sensibility rather than rules and codes, though these two dimensions are inextricable (Hagen 2010, p. 3). Hagen disagrees with previous scholarship, which depicts *li* in terms of external principles and standards. With reference to ritual theorist Catherine Bell, he argues that inner feeling or "cultivated disposition" does not just accompany *li* but is fundamental to it (p. 5). For him, *li* is not even the internalization of external norms but is a sense of ritual propriety as such (p. 14). Similarly, Hagen argues that *yi* denotes not rules or principles but a sense of appropriateness grounded in empathy. In this way, *yi* ensures the moral reliability of *li*, and *li* constitutes the foundation of external ritual acts and performances (p. 15). If this understanding of Confucius' view of *li* and *yi* is accurate, the valiant may have misunderstood the essence of *xingli ruyi*. Instead of following a set of ritual codes or principles and repeating customary performances, *xingli ruyi* refers to a spontaneous and appropriate expression of ritual sensibility appropriately. It is not to follow a set of ritual practices legalistically but to make a ritual practice conform to what the people see as appropriate. As Hagen points out, a ritual practice should allow a certain degree of flexibility (p. 16).

Hagen's understanding of Confucius' view, which depicts *li* and *yi* as something fundamentally internal, coheres better with the overall style of the *Analects*. His interpretation of Book Ten of the *Analects* also grasps its spirit and message more accurately (pp. 6–7), for that chapter does not intend to exhaust what practices are ritually right or wrong. Rather, it illustrates how Confucius spontaneously expresses his sense of ritual propriety and behaves accordingly in different occasions (see *Analects* 10.1–18). In addition, this internal approach also coincides with Confucius' understanding of the basis of ritual propriety. For Confucius, *ren* 仁, which can roughly be translated as benevolence or humaneness, is the foundation and source of *li*. In turn, ritual performance or ceremony is better to be sparing than extravagant (3.4–5). In fact, Hagen's internal approach to *li* and *yi* is not entirely new. In her reading of the *Analects*, Karyn Lai tracks the meaning of *li* by delineating three stages of moral cultivation. While *li* mainly refers to external norms and principles to the novice, it becomes more and more internal through the stages and finally turns out to be internal self-expression of the mature (Lai 2006, p. 69). This understanding of *li* in the mature stage of moral cultivation is close to Hagen's conception. In this stage, *yi* does not refer to an external standard or principle but to a sense of appropriateness that informs the ritual and the moral deliberation of mature and cultivated persons (p. 77). Recently, Lu Yinghua also considers that the essence of *li* lies not in external expression but inner feeling (Lu 2020, p. 74). Incorporating this view with Hagen's interpretation, the final goal of *xingli ruyi* is neither to comply with external requirements nor to attain external outcomes but to cultivate one's disposition and sensibility so that he or she can act appropriately in whatever circumstances.

Apart from his reading of the *Analects*, Hagen contends that Mencius also favors the internality of *li*. For Hagen, Mencius' theory of sprouts (*duan* 端) suggests that the sprout of *li*, just like that of *ren* and *yi*, is inherent in humanity. Although this sprout of *li* requires a good external environment to be fully developed, the internal dimension of *li* is more fundamental (Hagen 2010, p. 2). Lu also argues that, for Mencius, *li* is to fulfil, rather than repair or cure, human nature and inner feeling, which are the source of *li* (Lu 2020, p. 73). This implies that *li* is within rather than outside human nature. As for Xunzi 荀子, the most important figure of classical Confucianism after Confucius and Mencius, while he seems to focus on the externality of *li* with his negative view upon human nature, Hagen argues that the internal and external dimensions of *li* work for each other and cannot be treated separately (Hagen 2010, p. 2). In an earlier article devoted to the study of Xunzi, Hagen comments that ritual is closely related to the sense of appropriateness, and so Xunzi used *liyi* as a compound to denote ritual propriety. This implies that, for Xunzi, ritual is always intertwined with a sense of appropriateness. Those who are well-cultivated will never abandon *liyi* because their external expression is always in harmony with their inner feeling. In fact, according to Xunzi, *li* is, first of all, an answer to the aesthetic sense of appropriateness, rather than a specific element of ritual action (Hagen 2003, pp. 375–76). Whereas there is no doubt that Xunzi has placed much importance on the external dimensions of *li*, Thomas Radice shares Hagen's argument that inner feeling and motivation are as important as the formal element to ritual aesthetics (Radice 2017, p. 468; Neville 2003, pp. 50, 55; Lai 2006, p. 410).

From the above discussion of *li* and *yi* in classical Confucianism, it is important to note that the main purpose of *xingli ruyi* is to cultivate ritual sensibility and appropriateness. While ritual forms and norms are not unimportant, the cultivation of appropriate feeling and disposition is more fundamental. More importantly, *xingli ruyi* should not be a problem in itself, for the traditional understanding of *li* and *yi* reveals that one should indeed perform a ritual according to her/his sense of appropriateness. To put this back to the context of the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement, *xingli ruyi* is essential to forming identity, sustaining solidarity, and cultivating political virtues. As Francis L. F. Lee points out in a digital media article, *xingli ruyi* is not necessarily bad. In fact, although the Tiananmen vigil may have limited immediate political effect, it is full of symbolic and even religious power that keeps renewing and empowering its participants. For this reason, even the localists should have their own rituals (Lee 2016). Lee's argument is in line with Radice's understanding of Xunzi, which considers that one can perform a ritual that embodies their ideals and beliefs without believing that it will affect the actual world (Radice 2017, p. 473). In short, the above brief revisitation of *li* and *yi* reveals that those who negatively dub political ritual as *xingli ruyi* fail to understand the essence of ritual. What they oppose is actually not ritual as such but any protests that have no intention to bring about immediate or prompt social changes. More importantly, their criticism demonstrates a dualistic view of non-violent political ritual and valiant resistance. As some studies of ritualized protest indicate, political ritual can sometimes prepare its participants for direct political actions (see Schnell 1995; Inclán and Almeida 2017). In Durkheim's terms, political ritual induces a state of collective effervescence that underlies the entire protest movement (Durkheim [1915] 1995, pp. 374–91). Besides, according to Turner, by dramatizing social conflicts, political ritual provides unlimited alternative possibilities and options that confront and undermine the existing social structure (Turner 1974, pp. 37–42). In a word, political ritual fuels direct political actions. This is not to legitimize militant or violent resistance but to problematize a dualistic view of ritualized protest and direct political action. Therefore, it may be quite naïve and counter-productive to believe that ritualized protest is in opposition to direct political action. On the contrary, it is important to ensure the performance of political ritual is *xingli ruyi*, lest it becomes mere formalism—only retaining the form of political ritual without an appropriate sensibility.

8. Conclusions

The above revisitation of *li* and *yi* shows that *xingli yuri* should not be something to be avoided. Contrary to the belief of the valiant, *xingli yuri* is a productive means to cultivate ritual sensibility and political virtues, which are important to long-term social change and the vitality of any social movement. Based on the number of attendances, which was ranging from 110,000 to 180,000 in 2015–2019,⁴ *xingli ruyi* is still able to help the Tiananmen vigil maintain its liveliness and pass on its political heritage in recent years. Although it is true that ritualized protest has obtained little success in terms of actual political outcomes after the anti-national education movement in 2012, they continue to be a predominant and productive way to connect pro-democratic citizens, dubbed as the “yellow ribbon” (*huangsi/wòhngsī* 黃絲/黃絲) after the Umbrella Movement, in Hong Kong. Although the valiant have been tired of attending this form of protest that has little immediate effect and has increasingly appealed to more radical measures, it remains an important way for most citizens to protest against the extradition bill and express their demands on more political rights. However, the fact that radical and confrontational forms of protest have received greater acceptance in recent years has called for a critical review of ritualized protest. Particularly, the criticism of ritualized protest as *xingli ruyi* has raised a crucial question: What is the point of repeating a set of political ritual that can hardly result in immediate outcomes? Based on the contextual analysis and theoretical reflection of this study, I argue that the essence of ritualized protests is to cultivate the ritual sensibility of the protester. This ritual sensibility is essential to social change in the long run because it cultivates people to pursue what is socially and politically appropriate.

Nonetheless, the criticism of ritualized protest as *xingli ruyi* filed by the valiant is not without reason. As I have pointed out in this paper, some ritualized protests—the 1 July march in particular—have been facing the problem of formalization. If a ritualized protest has been ossified, it would have become what Lee and Chan call a “ritualistic” protest, which is a stable and repetitive political activity without nourishing participants’ ritual sensibility. To me, this is a protest that is ritual only in form but not in essence. However, in contrast to the valiant, I do not find *xingli ruyi* problematic. Rather, I contend that ritualized protest that fails to *xingli ruyi* will lose its power and become pointless, for it can no longer foster citizens’ ritual sensibility and social ethos. I will conclude this paper with two final remarks in this regard.

First, ritual sensibility is crucial to the vitality of a social movement and the society-at-large. This is exemplified by the Tiananmen vigil. As a ritualized protest, its goal is not to overturn a regime but to “do what is right and appropriate.” This is the essence of *xingli ruyi*—that is, to perform a ritual according to a sense of propriety and appropriateness. The vigil keeps refreshing the memory of the Tiananmen Square incident and revitalizing the democratic spirit of the Tiananmen Square protests. It cultivates a ritual sensibility that constitutes the value system of pro-democratic Hong Kong citizens and serves as a cultural symbol of the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement. Besides providing a sense of identity and creating a liminal space for resistance, ritualized protests in these years—from the various occupation movements, the prostrating walks, the religious symbols in the Umbrella Movement, to the human chains and collective singings in the anti-extradition movement—have embodied a democratic ethos and inspired citizens of different social backgrounds. As I have argued, this ritual sensibility is necessary for constructive and long-term social change. In short, the primary task of ritualized protest is to embody and express a ritual sensibility in an appropriate way. In turn, this ritual sensibility not only keeps a social movement vigorous but also facilitates social changes that benefit the general interest of the community. The criticism of ritualized protest in recent years invites its organizers and participants to review whether it has lost its original intention and thus its power in cultivating ritual sensibility. To borrow Catherine Bell’s concept of ritualization, a

⁴ The Tiananmen vigil was banned for the first time in 2020 under the COVID-19 pandemic.

ritualized body—a body of agents that has a sense of ritual—is essential to a protest that is set off from other acts (Bell 1992, pp. 74, 93, 98).

Second, ritual agents in public protest need to be aware of and open to repertoire changes. This study has shown that while the valiant have found it pointless to observe ritualized protests in a time of deepening crisis, their confrontational actions had no lack of ritual characters. In fact, the rituality of their actions, though largely unconscious, was not unimportant in maintaining their solidarity and morale. Seen in this way, what the valiant have rejected is not ritual as such but those repertoires of contention, a term of Charles Tilly and Sidney G. Tarrow to refer to inherited forms of collective actions (Tilly and Tarrow 2015, p. 7), that lack political efficacy according to their experience. The time after the Umbrella Movement marks a rapid political change in which Beijing increasingly tightens its control over Hong Kong. According to Tilly and Tarrow, this rapid change will stimulate innovation in repertoires (p. 19), which are “the source of tactical performances” (p. 21). This reminds the organizers and the participants to stay open to changes in tactical performances. The essence of a ritualized protest does not lie in its established practice but its ritual sensibility. Therefore, instead of sticking to established practices, a ritualized protest should be flexible in determining how to express a sense of ritual and political appropriateness in changing environments. On the other hand, the valiant should also be aware of their ritual sensibility, lest their new repertoires of contention would be easily routinized. After all, a public protest or social movement, whether in a non-violent or a valiant form, cannot last if its performances or actions do not correspond to a sense of appropriateness.

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