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Hong Kong: The Riots of 2019-2020

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Abstract:

The Hong Kong protests that occurred from 2019 to 2020 were a crucial moment for the city and its inhabitants. The demonstrations began in response to a proposed extradition law that would have permitted Hong Kong residents to be extradited to mainland China for trial, but the movement swiftly evolved into a broader fight for democracy and against police brutality, resulting in violent confrontations with law enforcement. The media played a substantial role in shaping public opinion on the protests, with different outlets and regions offering diverse perspectives and coverage. This essay intends to explore and analyse the role of media in the Hong Kong riots of 2019. In addition, the essay will try to do a metaphor analysis to better comprehend the language and rhetoric employed in media coverage and its potential influence on the protests.

Background:

During the initial months of 2019, the Hong Kong government proposed a bill that would permit the extradition of criminal suspects to mainland China, leading to extensive protests across the city. On June 9th 2019, the protestors launched their first large-scale mass-gathering against the proposed extradition bill by the Hong Kong government. Gradually, in April and July, the movement escalated to an extravagant level and immediately transitioned into a series of riot of the protestors, pro-democracy demonstrators and other similar advocates for the cause. The nature of the riot involved actions like blocking of the traffic, intervening with the aviation, smashing the shops, attacking the public spaces like toilets, parks, threatening the tourists, police etc and destroying the public facilities. Thus, in all, completely disrupting the social order of Hong Kong.

Those against the bill, asserted that this bill would erode Hong Kong's legal system and the autonomy. Not only this, it would further put the citizens at the risk of unjust trials by the Chinese government. The emergence of any riot is underpinned with multiple stages of revolutions, public movements etc. Why does any form of protest culminate into a movement? Is there any particular form of the movement has taken the attention of the crowd? What is the triggering factor behind them? Is any form of social movement always the result of small protests or vice-versa?

In the case of the Hong Kong riots, there has been a major social movement that was started in 2014, the umbrella movement. The riots of 2019 was a bigger picture of what started in 2014 and therefore, gave a push to the already existing anger amongst the citizens against the authorities of the Hong Kong. The nature of the protest varied from peaceful state to violent actions including demonstrators, mostly young people, taking part in peaceful marches, strikes, occupying government buildings and disturbing the day to day functioning of the common people by blocking roads & railways transportations. 'They also wanted political reforms to ensure universal suffrage- the ability to choose Hong Kong's leaders themselves – as

set under the city's mini constitution, the Basic Law.'¹ The intensity and the size of the protests varied during the entire course of the riot.

In spite of the all-embracing mass action against the bill, the government refused to withdraw the bill. This was followed by the constant increase in the intensity of the nature of the protest which was eventually retaliated by the forces of the nation using tear gases, arrests etc. The anti-bill movement started taking the shape of a broader themed pro-democracy movement that demanded for the expansion of the civil liberties and increase in the accountability and transparency of the government, thereby leading to the picking out of the symbols that represented the Chinese government. This consequently led to the call for greater independence of the for Hong Kong.

Towards the end of 2019, the protest gradually started losing its force and intensity. The authorities responded with a number of measures, which included arrest of protestors after using pepper sprays, tear gases and other similar equipment. There was an official end to the protest in December, when the police forces cleared the remaining protestors from the occupied areas. Even though the protests culminated in major arrest and suppression of the mass crowd gatherings, it instigated a sense of confidence in the citizens of Hong Kong, especially the youth, on how they should proceed with the idea of change in the fundamentals of the working of the governance system that was followed since the time of colonial rules. In spite of the government's backlash on the protestors, it was significant in the Hong Kong's fight for the democracy and autonomy, and it was a major motivating factor for the new generation of the activists to continue struggling for their rights.

Media:

The protest attracted the attention of the media from around the world. The coverage of the media was very extensive and it was covered by the sphere of both local and the international agencies. The reports on the protests covered entire of socio-political aspects however, it was mostly inclined towards propagating the crowd ideologies to give a boost to the motion. On one hand, there was the presence of local news agencies and print media like the SC Morning Post which served the purpose of engaging the audience through in-depth coverage of the protest and providing every minute details of the riots. Other traditional media centres, newspapers like the Hong Kong Free Press were also involved in providing the in-depth analysis and coverage of the same. While on the other hand, there was the presence of the international media outlets like the CNN and BBC which also provided their insights on the same but from an angle of interventions.

There were certain core issues that pertained in reference to the Hong Kong riots like those of censorship and biasness of the media. Generally, it is believed that the media plays a central role in shaping of the public opinion. In terms of biasness of the media, there were groups of media outlets who were pro-Beijing from the very beginning like the Ta Kung Pao and Wen Wei Po who focused on producing reports that aligned with their political ideologies. Similarly, there were a group of media centres that were very much in charge of the promotion of the public sentiments in the riots by promoting the pro-democracy ideology and thereby the sharing the emotion with the crowd. These included the riot-focused groups like the Apple Daily who were intentionally blamed for their sensationalism. As a consequence of these actions, there were trigger points in the riot that led to attack on offices of Ta Kung Pao and Wen Wai Po for the promotion of false reports and thereby defending the ideology of the crowd.

Theories:

There are certain theories that provides explanation of the media biasness or the metaphorical terms used to describe the range of events. According to Paul Chilton², the amount and version of the information that is being transferred is determined by the language that people use. This implies that the way language is used does not provide a completely unbiased representation of reality. Moreover, the way people's cognition and thought process goes, decides how the power has influenced the opinions. Further, there is a

¹ Hong Kong's protests explained - Amnesty International

² Chilton, Paul. 2004. Analysing political discourse: Theory and practice. London: Routledge.

manifestation towards changing the thoughts of the others by using various strategies in order to achieve the plans of one's own. It is evident how metaphors have the ability to showcase people's perception and construction of the world and at the same time reflecting how to affect people's thinking.

In this essay, I intend to provide a picture of how the metaphors used or the headlines were used by the media agencies in shaping the opinion of the world in the significant riots of 2019 in the city of Hong Kong. The process that I will use will involve several theories before indulging directly into the news articles published around the world. Therefore, it is important to dive into the theories before 'stating the headline as it is' and providing an analysis of the same.

Van Dijk (2002)³ writes about how news text is increasingly turning into a source of metaphor study around the world and it is this study that is further involved in tailoring the opinions of the crowd. As per George Lakoff, how the cognitive linguistics are being represented, how the metaphors are generated and eventually how they are linked to the understanding of the metaphor is closely related to the development of the human recognition. Therefore, it is important to understand how the things are framed and for this framing it is of utmost importance to understand the cognitive development of the human mind.

There have been certain interpretations of the theories proposed by various scholars who tend to invite debate and discussions on the metaphorical analysis of the news texts. Cognitive linguistics play an incredible role in the process; therefore, it becomes quintessential to perform a critical cognition analysis.⁴ What does this process encompass? Well, in the phenomenon of the *critical cognition analysis*, in particular, on events related to Hong Kong protests, attempts are made to examine the metaphors of the western media reports.

The analysis reveals that there were a series of set stages that were followed, which began with the revealing of the conceptualization process of the events, followed by the recreation of the facts that were previously distorted by subsequently selective highlighting and obscuration. 'Interestingly, the eventuality of the mapping of the metaphors are not just framed vaguely. They, in fact, follow a certain chronology that is based on people's personal perception. Following the establishment of the metaphors and wide acceptance of the same by the language users, there is a push towards strengthening people's opinion in a certain way. Therefore, through this way of thinking, people's behaviour and perceptions are structured.'⁵

Another group of scholars propose the idea of *Conceptual Integration theory*, which involves the case of cognitive language research. Fauconnier (1997)⁶ points towards how this theory is a basic mental operation wherein it works over mental spaces. According to Fauconnier, there should be four mental spaces in conceptual integration, which should include two input spaces, one generic one and one being the integrated space. The western media plays a very crucial role in this context.

The domestic mainstream media is somewhat questionable when glancing through the lens of the above-mentioned theory. They put an effort to paint the picture of the riots in terms of reports, requesting the rioters to return to the rationality and showing the image of police restoring the order of the city. What they actually don't observe is the police brutality being used and the oppression of the protestors who are raising their voice for a cause. In fact, when the western media present the real picture of the scenario of suppression and brutality, they are being criticised for reporting things out of context and for using the videos and images of specific local perspectives selectively and ignoring the violence of the mob. They are further criticised for the specific images portray of the police brutality showcasing the use of batons and firing bullets. Thus, regardless of the cause and effects of the incidents the western media receives

³ van Dijk, Teun A. 2002. Political discourse and political cognition. In Chilton Paul & Christina Schaffner (eds.), *Politics as text and talk: Analytical approaches to political discourse*, 203–237. Amsterdam: John Benjamin's.

⁴ Lakoff, George & Mark Johnson. 1980. *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago: The Chicago University Press.

⁵ Ji, X. (2021) "Conceptual metaphor and media bias: A critical metaphor analysis of British and American mainstream media reports on the Hong Kong riots," *Chinese Semiotic Studies*, 17(2), pp. 325–339. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1515/css-2021-0016>.

⁶ Fauconnier, Gilles. 1997. *Mappings in thought and language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

complaints of not just promoting the tension between the police and civilians, but also for escalating misinformation to the international spectrum of people.

During the 2019 Hong Kong protests, two major flashpoints occurred. ‘The flashpoints model of public disorder was initially developed by David Waddington and his colleagues on the basis of case studies undertaken in the 1980s of violent and non-violent episodes of crowd behaviour in and around the major English city of Sheffield, South Yorkshire’⁷ The first was the storming and occupation of Hong Kong’s Legislative Council by protestors on July 1st.⁸ The protestors’ act of breaking into the council building and defacing the emblem of the People’s Republic of China was a bold statement against the government and its perceived disregard for the wishes of Hong Kong citizens. This occupation of the council was also symbolic of the protestors’ frustration with the government’s lack of progress in achieving their demands for democracy and accountability. The second major flashpoint occurred in November 2019 when violent clashes broke out between protestors and police. Police stormed the campus of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University⁹ to disperse protestors, and the siege lasted for several days. Police used tear gas, rubber bullets, and water cannons against protestors who responded with Molotov cocktails and bricks. This standoff at the university highlighted the increasing escalation of violence in the protests and the growing tension between protestors and police.

Based on the intricacies of the riots, there is a need to further investigate into the theories. Another important theory is an extended version of the conceptual integration theory. This is seen in the context of the *Critical Discourse Model*, which is in a way application of the conceptual integration theory. According to this model, the way in which the people think, are rooted in certain types of cultural model and they might involve individual cognitive differences. Thus, it is ideated that the conceptual integration theory is a better way of understanding the processing of the metaphor and thereby for the creation of a certain meaning.

It is crucial to know the framing of the news headline and this framing as a concept was first introduced by Goffman in 1974.¹⁰ According to him, any kind of framework was a significant element that people try to convert social reality into subjective thinking. In fact, another group of scholars explain framing in terms of a core concept of media text organisation and it is used very efficiently by the media agencies in tailoring the audience as per their own perceptions. Also, in the process of this framing and converting this social reality into people’s subjective thoughts, it is very crucial to focus on highlighting and selection. Goffman further explains that ‘the reason why metaphors become an important tool for the interest groups to implant their ideology is very much because of the double functions of the highlighting and concealing in the mapping of the target domains.’¹¹ This makes it easier for the interest groups to either go with the selective interests or ignore anything that does not go along with their own ideology.

The cognitive experience of human beings is influenced by the cultural and social background in which they are rooted.¹² It is mostly stated to define a certain type of violence or disorder that comes into existence because of the basic fundamental issues, often misread as the trigger point of the protest. From a psychological perspective, the Hong Kong protests of 2019 can be analysed in terms of the concept of crowd. In a crowd, individuals tend of their sense of individuality and merge into a collective entity, which can foster a feeling of unity and a common goal among the members of the crowd.’ The “crowd” to be considered is not merely an assembly of persons, but an assembly in which a “collective mind” has been formed.’¹³ The political and media discourses of different countries are influenced by their social structure,

⁷ Chapter 2 in Riots: an international comparison

⁸ [Hong Kong protest timeline: The evolution of a movement | CNN](#)

⁹ [Hong Kong Polytechnic University on fire after violent clashes between protestors and police · Global Voices](#)

¹⁰ Goffman, Erving. 1974. *Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press

¹¹ *ibid*

¹² Ji, X. (2021) “Conceptual metaphor and media bias: A critical metaphor analysis of British and American mainstream media reports on the Hong Kong riots,” *Chinese Semiotic Studies*, 17(2), pp. 325–339. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1515/css-2021-0016>.

¹³ Le Bon, G. (1968) *The Crowd: A study of the popular mind* (Originally published 1895). Dunwoody, GA: Norman S. Berg. (chapter 1)

the personal experience of politicians, and their hobbies, featuring different metaphorical expressions and habits of thinking.¹⁴

Another important category in terms of theory is the *Critical metaphorical analysis*, which was proposed by Charteris Black in 2004. According to the author, it is essentially a combination of ideology and rhetoric to study the textual function of the metaphor.¹⁵ In fact, as per his ideas, metaphor has the potential to arouse the emotions and affect people's perception of the objective world. The use of critical metaphor in language is a persuasive act that encourages the audience to interpret and engage with the message, making it a valuable method for studying the connection between language, society, and thought. Analysing critical metaphor can provide a new and effective approach to understanding this relationship in greater depth.¹⁶

Emotions are a part of all social actions and 'there was an intersection of reason and emotion, self-interest and pro-sociality, in the Hong Kong protest of 2019, says David Cantoni and co-authors in "Protests as strategic games: Experimental evidence from Hong Kong's Antiauthoritarian movement".¹⁷ Certain emotions like fear, anger, sadness etc are a part of reflex emotions that arise suddenly and the political activists or even the protestors fighting for a fundamental change seem to use it very strategically to make it work in their favour.¹⁸ University students have been integral to the 2019 protests in Hong Kong. More than 6,000 people have been arrested in connection with demonstrations since June.¹⁹ The crowd witnessed young population to an extreme extent and this displays how the youth of the country were interested in the changing the fundamentals of the nation.

Throughout the journey of the protests, there were equally negative impact on the mental health of the citizens. For example, 'in just five months, at least eight protestors have committed suicides as a result of the city's turmoil.'²⁰ Further, there was an astonishing rise in the suicide rates of the people. Evidences like these suggest that protests wreak havoc on mental & physical health and they are even prone to cause increase in the developing other life-threatening diseases. But what is that pushing the crowd to perform such extreme actions? Is it the emotions? How far does the emotion play a role in the making the riot bad to worse? Thus, lets dive into the language play of the several international media and analyse how the crowd was influenced by the power of metaphor and language play.

News Analysis: Local & International Media

Local Media:

1. "Hong Kong airport shuts down amid **chaotic clashes** between police and protesters," published on August 12, 2019.
2. "Hong Kong **protesters hurl petrol bombs** and bricks in day of rage," published on October 5, 2019.
3. "Hong Kong protests: Hundreds of **students form human chain** outside schools," published on September 9, 2019.
4. "Hong Kong protests: thousands rally in support of police as **activists gather** to mark one month since Yuen Long mob attack" (Published on August 21, 2019)

¹⁴ Ji, X. (2021) "Conceptual metaphor and media bias: A critical metaphor analysis of British and American mainstream media reports on the Hong Kong riots," *Chinese Semiotic Studies*, 17(2), pp. 325–339. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1515/css-2021-0016>.

¹⁵ Ibid, pp. 328.

¹⁶ Ji, Yuhua & Yan Chen. 2007, A new approach to critical discourse analysis: Critical metaphor analysis. *Journal of Xiamen University (Philosophy and Social Sciences)* 2007(6). pp. 42–48.

¹⁷ [Hong Kong Protests: Reasoning and Emotion | Psychology Today](#)

¹⁸ Emotional Dimensions of Social Movements Goodwin, Jeff; Jasper, James M; Polletta, Francesca; Snow, David A; Soule, Sarah A; Kriesi, Hanspeter pp 413-432

¹⁹ [The Tragic Psychological Toll of the Hong Kong Protests \(freethepeople.org\)](#)

²⁰ [The Tragic Psychological Toll of the Hong Kong Protests \(freethepeople.org\)](#)

5. "Hong Kong protests: Beijing weighs options as **unrest shows** no sign of easing" (Published on August 15, 2019)

Above mentioned are few examples of headlines from the South China Morning Post, a local news media on the incidents of riots in Hong Kong. It is certainly believed that every media has its own limitations despite its vividness. The use of the terms like 'chaotic clashes', 'protestors hurl petrol bombs', 'students form human chain', 'activists gather', 'unrest shows' etc represent the brutal activism of the demonstrators wherein there is selective use of words to perform a tailoring of the public emotion in support of the police force. This in turn can be seen as a way of looking at the clashes from an anti-protesting notion wherein the police force/administration are at the receiving end of the brutality. Thus this domain of the 'non-peaceful demonstration' would engage public emotion of those who support the administration while looking down upon the crowd gathering who have taken a stand for a cause. This might differ when compared to international media. Let us see a few examples from the US and the UK on the similar issue.

UK Media:

1. "Hong Kong protests: UK condemns '**unacceptable**' violence after day of chaos" - The Guardian (Published on August 12, 2019)
2. "Hong Kong protests: UK foreign secretary urges China to '**respect Hong Kong's autonomy**'" - Sky News (Published on August 7, 2019)
3. "Hong Kong protests: UK urged to grant asylum to '**brave**' Hongkongers" - The Independent (Published on November 12, 2019)
4. "Hong Kong protests: Chinese ambassador **accuses UK of meddling**" - BBC News (Published on July 12, 2019)
5. "Hong Kong protests: UK must protect its interests from **Beijing's aggression**" - The Telegraph (Published on June 14, 2019)

Above mentioned news articles are taken from various UK based media from June 2019 – December 2019. A common observation amongst these are the use of the phrases and terms to describe the situation from a third-party view. These articles, when observed carefully, present a pragmatic picture of police brutality and how the protestors faced retaliation by the state. The state, instead of supporting the cause, backfired on those who were genuinely rooting for the system. The use of phrases like 'unacceptable violence', 'brave HongKongers', 'accuses UK', 'Beijing's aggression', 'respect Hong Kong's autonomy' etc represent how the international media were seen as an unwanted intervention when they were trying to support the demonstrators in their fight. Not only this, they also represent that it was the problem with the protestors and not the state. Thus, it is very crucial how the words are chosen to influence the opinion of the public by the media agencies.

US Media:

1. "Hong Kong Protests: **Police Clash with Demonstrators** as Airport Cancels Flights" by Chris Buckley, The New York Times, August 12, 2019
2. "Hong Kong **police shoot protester**, man set on fire in day of rage" by James Pomfret and Anne Marie Roantree, Reuters, November 11, 2019
3. "Hong Kong protesters demand **accountability over mob attack**" by Chris Buckley, The New York Times, July 28, 2019
4. "Hong Kong **Police Fire Tear Gas** as Violence Continues to Rock City" (November 17, 2019)
5. "Hong Kong **Police Storm Subway with Batons** as Protests Continue" (August 31, 2019)

In reference to the above mentioned articles from the various news agencies of the US, it is obvious that the cases of police brutality were severe during the entire duration of the riots. Thus, there was an image amongst the international world of the atrocities of the state, of which the local media were either unaware of or didn't want to portray the reality. The use of the terms in the news headlines like 'police clash with demonstrators', 'police shoot protestors', 'mob attack', 'police fire tear gas' etc in itself are a clear representation of the intense violence nature of the state to mitigate the crowd. In fact, there was an image that the international intervention of the media is directed towards increasing the sensitive crowd for an even more violence against the state. How is this justified? Who would listen to the voice of the victim? If not the international media, who would intervene? These are the few questions, that still remain unanswered.

Conclusion:

To sum up, it can be said that media plays a very crucial role in deciding the nature of the riots or any similar incident. Various theories have been put forward on the analysis of the news terminologies. It depends on what kind of language is used to create an influence and build a narrative around the world. The Hong Kong riots of 2019 has a significant impact on the social order of the city, and at the same time it creates an open question for the world to decide on the role of international media and local media in shaping the opinion of the common man. It is indeed, a matter of debate and discussion as to define where is a fine line that should be drawn between the contrasting the media agencies to portray a near-real image to world. In fact, it should be the cognitive mind of the human being who decides on the sides of the riots. It can be tilted towards the demonstrators or the state, but a neutral line needs to be drawn from the perspective of the media!

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