

‘Hong Kong Add Oil!’: A Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Graffiti On Hong Kong’s “Lennon Walls”

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Abstract.

A massive social event, namely the Anti-Extradition Bill Movement (Anti-ELAB) emerged as a result of the introduction of the Fugitive Offenders Amendment Bill by the Hong Kong Government in February 2019. Lennon Walls where graffiti, posters and banners were embedded in, arose after the Chief Executive Carrie Lam announced the indefinite suspension of the bill and refused its withdrawal despite numerous public demonstrations. This study proposes a multimodal discourse analysis of 150 graffiti (post-it graffiti and spray-painted graffiti) created on or around the Lennon Walls in Hong Kong between February and December 2019, to identify their linguistics and visual characteristics and examine what meanings they construct for the sign makers and viewers. The finding suggests the graffiti were predominantly written in traditional Chinese with notable examples of neologisms. Content analysis reveals that the signs and discourses represented in this particular manifestation of ‘anti-extradition bill movement’ largely index messages of encouragement, courage, freedom and the Hong Kong identity. This research illustrates a possible contribution to Sociolinguistics through the examination of the Lennon Walls as political discourse and explains how sign makers use a range of available repertoires in expressing their experience and feelings during Anti-ELAB. This study seeks to expand the notion of graffiti to include post-it graffiti as a variant of the conventional spray-painted street art.

Keywords: Anti-Extradition Bill Movement; Graffiti; Political discourse; Social movement; Social semiotics

1. Introduction

A massive social event, namely the Anti-Extradition Bill Movement (Anti-ELAB) emerged as a result of the introduction of the Fugitive Offenders and Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters Legislation (Amendment) Bill 2019 (The Fugitive Offenders Amendment Bill) by the Hong Kong government in February 2019. This Bill was proposed by the Hong Kong government in response to the murder of a 20-year-old Hong Kong woman Poon Hiu Wing by her boyfriend Chan Tong Kai in Taiwan in 2018. The Fugitive Offenders Amendment aims to fill the gap in Hong Kong’s jurisdiction and allow fugitives to be transferred to Taiwan and Mainland China.

Lacking confidence in China’s judicial system and fearing the erosion of Hong Kong’s legal system, protestors called for numerous demonstrations from March to June 2019. The Lennon Walls Hong Kong (The Lennon Walls), where graffiti, posters and banners were embedded in, arose after the Chief Executive Carrie Lam announced the indefinite suspension of the bill and refused its withdrawal despite intense clashes and protests in June 2019. Originally appearing in the Umbrella Movement in 2014, the Lennon Wall was set up again in front of the Hong Kong

Central Government Offices staircase in 2019. The aesthetic infrastructure began to spring across many districts in Hong Kong and outside Hong Kong in countries and cities including Thailand, Taiwan, Netherlands, Finland, and New York.

1.1 Definitions of Graffiti

Graffiti is traditionally considered illegal actions in which words, figures, and images are drawn, marked, sprayed, or painted on public surfaces without consent from the government or authority. Other scholars identified graffiti base not on the legal/ illegal distinction, but its content, composition and overall aesthetic. Bloch (2012) described graffiti-murals as ‘those produced by self-described, acknowledge and active members of the graffiti community in public view with, primarily, the use of aerosol spray paint’ (p.124). Sabrina (2019) remarked the tension between street art and graffiti, with the former referring to large murals and the latter mainly to tagging or writing. Despite their tension, Sabrina (2019) opted for the term ‘street art’ to encompass both tags, writings and art works unless there is a strong indication of a tag instead of an artistic expression. A recent form of graffiti/ street art named knitting graffiti (or yarn bombing) begin to emerge in many cities including New York and Hong Kong. Rather than paints, artists create items using yarn and attach them to public objects and monuments. This variant form of graffiti/street art throws light on how the notion of graffiti can be redefined and reinterpreted.

1.2 Graffiti as a Political Discourse

According to Hanauer (2004), ‘graffiti fulfills three functions of (a) allowing the entry within public discourse of messages regarded as marginal by other media; (b) providing the individual with the opportunity to express controversial contents publically; and finally (c) they offer marginal groups the possibility of expressing themselves publically’ (p.29-30). In other words, graffiti is an act of literacy that brings voice of the marginalized groups which are often ‘hidden’ and unheard within the linguistic landscape. Peteet (1996) added that graffiti not only expresses political positions, it also motivates political action (p.306).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Structure and composition of visual images

Derived from Halliday’s (1978) social semiotics, Kress and Leeuwen (2006) saw signs as socially made. They believed signs are always

newly made in social interaction; signs are motivated, not arbitrary relations of meaning and form; the motivated relation of a form and a meaning is based on and arises out of the interest of makers of signs; the forms/ signifiers which are used in the making of signs are made in social interaction and become part of the semiotic resources of a culture. (p.54-55)

Building on Halliday’s (1978) systematic functional grammar, Kress and Leeuwen (2006) have identified two visual structures of representation: (1) narrative representation which unfold actions and events or processes of change; (2) conceptual representation which represents participants in terms of taxonomy, structure or meaning. Kress and Leeuwen (2006) identified three ways to examine the interactive meaning of images: contact (demand or offer), social distance (personal, social, impersonal) and attitude (involvement, detachment, viewer power, equality and represented participant power). The composition of an image can also be understood from three interrelated systems: information value (centered and polarized, left and

right, top and bottom), salience (foreground or background, relative size, contrasts in colour, differences in sharpness) and framing (maximum disconnection, maximum connection). Kress and Leeuwen's (2006) social semiotic framework is deemed appropriate for this study because it allows a systematic analysis of the content of the graffiti. More specifically, it shows how the visual structure and the composition of the visual and verbal elements of the graffiti contribute to their meanings.

2.2 The meaning of signs in the physical world

Scollon and Scollon (2003) defined geosemiotics as 'the study of social meaning of the material placement of signs and discourses and of our actions in the material world' (p.2). Central to the concept of geosemiotics is the principle of *indexicality*, which focuses on the social meanings of signs through its placement in the real world. In illustrating the concept, Scollon and Scollon (2003) used 'the icon of a hamburger and a soft drink with the international 'prohibition' symbol found in the Mass Transit Railway in Hong Kong' (p.28) as an example. They argued the sign indicated that no food or drinks are allowed, without specifying where this prohibition is to apply. Hence, the indexicality of the sign is important: a sign only has meaning when it is placed in the material world.

In developing the geosemiotic theory, Scollon and Scollon (2003) identified three concepts that are integral: the interaction order, visual semiotics, and place semiotics. The focus of this study is on place semiotics, where three general geosemiotic practices are identified: decontextualized semiotics, transgressive semiotics, and situated semiotics. *Decontextualized semiotics* refers to 'all the forms of signs, pictures and texts which may appear in multiple contexts but always in the same form (p.145). An example of decontextualized semiotic is the Adidas stripes which may appear in the same form on all products or posters. *Transgressive semiotics* includes 'any sign that is in the 'wrong' place' (p.146). For instance, the graffiti drawn on public walls and footbridges in Hong Kong is a form transgressive semiotics. *Situated semiotics* include 'regulatory signs or notices as directions to the train in a metro system or an exit sign' (p.146). The notion of place semiotics is integral to the understanding of the indexicality of signs as the placement of signs has endowed it with additional meanings, one that would redefine the graffiti.

2.3 Research Questions

Given the sociocultural and political contexts in which the Lennon Walls were created, what meanings – tangible, intangible, visible, invisible, heard, unheard – do the graffiti convey? Two specific research questions are:

1. What are the linguistic and visual characteristics of the graffiti created in the Anti-ELAB context?
2. How is the experience during the Anti-ELAB protests reflected in this meaning-making process?

3. Methodology

3.1 Data Collection

The main objective of this study is to understand the meaning of graffiti created during the Anti-ELAB protests in Hong Kong between February and December 2019. The data for this

study consists of comprehensive photography of post-it graffiti (where protest messages were written on 'Post-it' notes and stuck on various surfaces) and spray-painted graffiti (conventional graffiti with the use of spray paint) placed on footbridges, pedestrian tunnels, staircases, walls, the floors and the ceilings of public infrastructure. The data were collected over a total of sixteen hours on fourteen separate visits to different districts in Hong Kong, including: Tsuen Wan, Tsim Sha Tsui, Choi Hung, Tsing Yi, Mei Foo, Yuen Long, Shau Kei Wan, the Chinese University of Hong Kong, Tseung Kwan O and Fortress Hill. The chosen areas include a tourist hub, a university, and twelve residential towns in Hong Kong. The visits were mainly made in July 2019, followed by other visits in September and November 2019.

A total of 130 photographs were taken during the visits. Data cleaning procedure was carried out after the graffiti were collected. The graffiti were excluded if: 1) they were duplications of utterances such as 'Hong Kong people add oil!' and their Chinese equivalence '香港加油!' that were repeatedly found on post-it notes; 2) they were visually unclear; 3) they were typed and printed, not handwritten by sign makers. Typed and printed signs which belong to genres such as leaflets or posters are excluded in this sample since they are the focus of other studies.

Following Kress and Leeuwen's (2006) theories, this study interprets the visual and verbal elements of the graffiti as an integrated text. In cases where a verbal text was accompanied by more than one visual element, they were treated as sub-units of the signs, contributing to the overarching meaning of the graffiti. At the first stage, a content analysis was conducted in order to identify the most commonly occurring themes and language features of the graffiti. At the second stage of data analysis, a visual semiotic/ multimodal perspective was adopted, therefore the linguistic and non-linguistic elements of the graffiti were examined in order to understand how the experience during the Anti-ELAB protests was conceptualized and expressed politically and psychologically. The data was read through several times to ensure all meaning was gleaned from the graffiti.

3.2 Problems in transcribing languages

Transcribing languages was problematic as some of the post-it graffiti were written in Japanese, German or Thai. In such cases, native speakers of these languages were asked to transcribe the texts so as to keep the original meaning of the signs. Regarding two neologisms created by sign makers such as 政黨, two Chinese characters were written next to each other, followed by a '+' since the word was created by blending two Chinese characters. In cases where drawings such as smiley faces or hearts were sketched on the post-its, they were transcribed and placed next to the texts.

3.3 Content analysis

The main purpose of the graffiti analyzed in this paper is to show encouragement and support to Hong Kong people and to make personal statements about the Anti-ELAB protest movement. The verbal texts are characterized by messages that range from a two-word phrases, short slogans, lengthier comments in paragraphs of up to 50-60 Chinese/ English words. While each piece of graffiti contributes to the overall meaning of a Lennon Wall, each post-it represents an individual assertion and expression, representing the sign maker's attitude, emotion, or stance over the social movement.

Interestingly, positive or neutral nouns such as 'Hong Kong', 'add oil', 'people' and 'freedom' are prevalent. These nouns are often accompanied by visual images including hearts or smiley faces. On the other hand, some nouns make negative references including 'black cop', 'pk' (a

euphemism of pok gai that means ‘to fall in the street’) (仆街 pok gai) and ‘death’. The Lennon walls also possess some common verbs that positively reference Hong Kong people: ‘add oil’. At the same time, there are phrasal verbs with negative reference to Hong Kong people or the Hong Kong government such as ‘give in’, ‘give up’, ‘tear off’ and ‘step down’. Note that many of these verbs are directives in which readers are told to undertake certain actions.

As for code preference, a large proportion of the signs are in traditional Chinese characters only, as indicated in Table 1 below. There were a number of bilingual signs and a few signs in Simplified Chinese, Japanese, German or Thai. It is interesting to see notable examples of neologisms such as 警黑 formed by blending the top parts of two Chinese characters ‘警’(Police - *ging*) and ‘黑’(black - *haak*) meaning police and black respectively. This new word accuses the police force for collaborating with triads during the Anti-ELAB protests.

Table 1: Languages appear at the graffiti

Languages	Frequency	Percentage
Monolingual Traditional Chinese	99	66
Monolingual Simplified Chinese	2	1.33
Monolingual English	28	18.67
Bilingual	12	8
Other languages	5	3.33
Visual images without verbal comment	4	2.67
Total	150	100

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Table 2. Frequency of informational categories of graffiti content

Theme	Example of Graffiti Message	Frequency	Language of occurrence
Anger	Furious	2	Chinese (1), English (1)
Comments on happenings/ the Police	Shame on black cop The black cop is a genuine outlaw	19	Chinese (12), English (3), German (1), Chinese and English (3)
Criticism of the government	There's no rioters, only tyranny	10	Chinese (8), English (1), Chinese and English (1)
Encouragement	Hong Kong Add oil! Support	42	Chinese (30), English (6), Japanese (2), Thai (1), Chinese and English (3)
Express gratitude	Thank you. Hong Kong people.	1	Chinese (1)
Freedom	Dear! Democracy is a good thing!	12	Chinese (4), English (6), Simplified Chinese (1), Chinese and English (1)
Hong Kong identity	WE ARE HONGKONERS	1	English (1)
Love	We love all you HK	5	Chinese (1), English (4)
Personal statement	We are striking in solidarity. Looking for respect Keine Chine auslieferung	26	English (3), Chinese (20), German (1), Chinese and English (2)
Politician name-calling	Junius Ho Kwan Yiu Scumbag	3	Chinese (3)
Questioning	Sell HK?	2	Chinese (1), English (1)
Reference to China	Hong Kong is never a part of China.	7	Chinese (3), English, (1) Simplified Chinese (1), Chinese and English (2)
Safety	Be safe	1	English (1)
Upcoming Actions	12/7 See you in Admiralty	12	Chinese (12)
Universal suffrage	I want real universal suffrage!	3	Chinese (3)
Visual images without verbal comment	Nao Mo, LIHKG pig, Pepe the frog and LIHKG dog	4	-
Total		150	

4. Results

4.1 A multimodal analysis of the data

In the following section, I discuss some selected examples of graffiti that represent the most salient aspects of the Lennon Wall.

The Hong Kong identity

One of the recurring icons in the protest movement was Pepe the Frog – a sad-looking anthropomorphic frog. This cartoon character originates from an American comic *Boy's Club* in 2005. As the figure gained in popularity on the internet forum 4chan and became an internet meme, it was appropriated as a symbol of alt-right and white supremacy in America. Pepe the Frog, however, has a different meaning in the Hong Kong protests. It stands for the Hong Kong identity: the frustrated look of the icon is relatable, reflecting the current unhappy feelings of the Hong Kong people. The figure is also highly versatile. In Figure 1 below, Pepe the Frog was decked with a yellow hard hat, resembling the “braves” (a word for protesters on the frontline) (勇武 *yong mou*) standing in the front line of the protest.

Figure 1: Pepe the Frog



On close examination, one would discover the graffiti is made up of a seamless patchwork of post-it notes in multiple colors. The post-it notes, originally seen as must-have office stationery, attained a new communicative status when they are arranged next to each other forming post-it collages. In many of these post-it collages, no accompanying textual message is found as the picture speaks for itself. In fact, according to Scollon and Scollon (2003), the emplacement of the sign forms a large part of its meaning. By placing Pepe the Frog on the floor of a public space, the sign makers declared open defiance to the government. Pepe the Frog is no longer a comic figure, it becomes semiotically transgressive when occupying a graffiti forbidden zone. The size and the color contrasts (between green and red) add visual weight to the composition of the picture, making Pepe the Frog sufficiently salient from the background. As can be seen, many of these post-it collages were fortified with tapes so they were not torn down by government supporters easily.

The prevalence of the post-it collages are also notable. Figure 1 above is taken from the footbridge outside the Tsuen Wan MTR station. Along the walkway was an array of non-linear post-it collages - Pepe the Frog, LIHKG pig, LIHKG dog, Winnie the Pooh - covering much of the spacing of the floor. The non-linear (network) arrangement suggests each element is interrelated but the readers can view, sequence and connect them in their own ways. The emplacement of multiple post-it collages in the physical world have a number of implications. First, it suggests the Hong Kong identity and the emotion it indexes is spreading everywhere – not only on the walls or the lampposts where post-it notes were plastered, but also the floor and

the ceiling. In addition, most of the post-it collages appeared in the pedestrian subways outside of MTR stations. The sites in which the post-it collages were showcased suggest their locations were not chosen at random - they were carefully selected to draw public attention and serve to mobilize more local people, media, and international audience to join in the dialogue.

In another instance, Pepe the Frog going hand in hand was found along the footbridge outside of Fortress Hill MTR station. In Figure 2 below, the spray-painted graffiti occupied the entire concrete block, beneath the railing where the verbal text ‘The unlawful regime. Blood for blood. Hong Kong people should fight back’ was located. Pepe the Frog was given human traits, being depicted as doctors, nurses, housewives, militancy, fire fighters, or children. They were holding each other’s hand symbolizing unity and solidarity in a time of crisis. To the left was a yellow sticker attached to a pipeline with the text ‘Five demands not one less’. Taken together, the verbal text and the visual sign appears to cohesive featuring solidarity and the need to stand in unity.

Figure 2: Pepe the Frog goes hand in hand



Calls for courage

Kress and Leeuwen (1996) argued that images involve two kinds of participants, represented participants and interactive participants, as well as three kinds of relations: 1. Relations between represented participants; 2. Relations between interactive and represented participants; and 3. Relations between interactive participants. With regard to the second type of relations, there is a fundamental difference between pictures from which represented participants look directly at the viewer, which are referred to as ‘demand’ and images without human participants which are referred to as ‘offer’.

In Figure 3 below, the fictional anthropomorphic teddy bear Winnie the Pooh is a ‘demand’ image since the character is represented as looking at the viewer, acknowledging the viewer explicitly. One of his hands is holding the prison pillar, invites the viewer to come closer in order to enter a kind of imaginary relationship with it. This can also be explained using speech act theory as proposed by Searle (2002). According to speech act theory, the sign maker is using the image to do something to the viewer – demanding viewers to undertake an action. This performative function is made explicit and reinforced by the verbal text: Fight till the end. See you in *Bao Di*. (The literal meaning of *Bao Di* is the base/ bottom of a pot. It is a metaphor for the Legislative Council in Admiralty because there was resemblance between their exterior designs) (煲底 bou dai), realized by the imperative mood. Hence, there is much consistency between the visual image and the verbal text.

Figure 3: Fight till the end. See you in Bao Di



As seen in Figure 3 above, the top section of the image is occupied by the verbal text whereas the visual image is placed at the bottom. Applying Kress and Leeuwen's (1996) concepts of the Ideal and the Real, ideologically speaking, the text plays a lead role and the picture a subservient role. The message 'Fight till the end. See you in Bao Di' is an emotive appeal which shows the readers what is likely to happen. On the other hand, the Real message gives practical information or consequences that may come about. Here, Winnie the Pooh which implicitly refers to 'lookalike' Chinese President Xi is being put in a prison cell. It is implied if the viewers fight till the end, the Chinese President will be in big trouble. Thus, mockery is embedded in this positively framed signage.

Pursuit of democracy and freedom

Kress and Leeuwen (1996) distinguished the information value of left and right using the concepts of Given and New. Verbal texts or visual images appearing on the left side of a text are Given, something that the viewer already knows or are familiar with whereas information on the right is New, information presented as something which is not yet known. While Kress and Leeuwen (1996) are concerned with the description of Western visual semiotics, their description of the top-bottom and left-right structures do provide insights in understanding many of the visual composition of the graffiti in this study.

In Figure 4 below, the Given information position is filled with a drawing of a yellow umbrella. The yellow umbrella is Given because it alluded to the Umbrella Movement that emerged in Hong Kong during 2014. In the Umbrella Movement, the yellow umbrella was a symbol of defiance and resistance, since they were held up by the protesters against the police. The same umbrella in bright yellow, highlighted in black, showed up again in 2019, denoting the pursuit of democracy and freedom. This message is also reinforced in the verbal text: Liberty thrives, rights divine, in our unending strides. Thus, intertextuality – trajectory of words and meanings of the same text in different contexts – is evident since the meaning of the yellow umbrella has been recontextualized in the current social movement. It is implied that sustained resistance against the suppression of the police and the government will lead to a perpetual freedom.

Figure 4: Liberty thrives, rights divine, in our unending strides



Scollon and Scollon (2003) pointed out the importance of taking into consideration the meaning of signs within the larger sociocultural context. Interestingly, the text in Figure 4 above is derived from the Cantonese song 'Glory to Hong Kong', created by a pro-democrat named Thomas, a professional musician in his early twenties. Thomas decided to write a Hong Kong protest song in order to unite Hong Kongers. His song received enthusiastic response from LIHKG Forum (a social media platform in Hong Kong) users who agreed to record the song. The song was so solemn and moving that it became an 'anthem' after it was sung by groups of protesters during the demonstration near the American Consulate in support of the 'Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act'. Thus the lyric simultaneously indexes the Hong Kong identity as well as the shared values and emotions among demonstrators.

The lyrics of this “anthem” was painted on the wall of a parking lot in Tseung Kwan Oi, a semiotically prohibited zone, thus it also became semiotically transgressive. Here, the intangible, transient, and audible is transformed into the tangible, persistent and the visual. The graffiti can then be seen as a crucially important weapon that marked one’s territory, presented opposition to the pro-government political positions visually and openly, and then set trajectories for people which may lead to possible erasure of the graffiti.

The press for democracy and freedom was shown in another instance. In Figure 5 below, a teenage couple occupied the centre of the signage. The couple was exchanging glances as they were nestled up against each other, foregrounding a huge red heart. The position of the couple highlights the importance of youth participation in the Anti-ELAB protests. This is explained by Ku (2020) that the Anti-ELAB protests offers young people ‘an opportune time to ignite a vivid revolutionary imagination unthought of before’ (p.113).

Figure 5: Fight for Freedom Stand With Hong Kong



Whilst occupying the central position, the image of the young couple also fills up the Real information position, giving practical information as to what has happened during the Anti-ELAB protests. This image represents a moment when “braves” or the “valiant” (勇武 *yong mou*) or young activists, equipped with helmets and gas masks, were combat ready. They were cuddling and wishing each other well before going to the ‘battlefield’. On top of the drawing is the caption ‘Fight for Freedom. Stand with Hong Kong’ written in capital letters.

Interestingly, the social movement has nurtured a number of love stories. Some young people became couples after going to the front lines together. On one level, the red heart refers to the romance blossoms. On another level, it also signifies deep affection for Hong Kong. Painted in red, the heart skillfully connects the drawing and the caption. Taken all together, it can be interpreted that the young activists are determined to ‘fight’ for freedom because ‘we just really fucking love Hong Kong’, as is written on one of the post-it.

5. Discussion

As can be seen, the Lennon Walls made up of numerous post-it mosaics become a space of solidarity and a site for self-expression. While the initial idea is to allow any passer-by to paste up colorful notes next to one another, the Lennon Wall has quickly transformed into a multilayered urban aesthetic infrastructure, with a rich combination of forms, styles, and materials. In fact, the contexts in which the Lennon Walls stood were highly multimodal involving a number of signs including printed leaflets, posters, drawings, stickers, flowers, stuff toys, gas masks and origami cranes as reflected in Figure 6. According to the Japanese culture, origami cranes are a symbol of hope and peace. When a thousand origami cranes are folded, a person will be granted a wish by the gods. In the Anti-ELAB movement, origami cranes (also called ‘Freenix’) were folded to commemorate several alleged cases of protesters who took

their lives leaving messages allegedly linked to the protest movement. In this instance, the origami cranes as signs are affective in nature. The choice of colors (multi-colors) conveys hope and wishes. The use of paper (as opposed to durable materials) encourages the same desired affect and through the material connotations of the signs indicates notions such as flexibility, resilience and adaptability. Taken holistically, a multimodal ensemble, in Kress's (2010) words, is shaped where different modes including writing, visual images, speech and music are aggregated, contributing to the overarching meaning of the Lennon Wall.

Figure 6: Lennon Wall at the Tsuen Wan MTR



On a deeper level, the Lennon Walls have ideological implications. Gramsci (1971) introduced the concept of hegemony to describe the 'cultural domination' of the bourgeoisie over the rest of the society. In Gramsci's (1971) view, the bourgeoisie ruled by force through its control over the state and by consent through its control over the culture of the society. The hegemony surface broke through when opposing voices held by dissenting stakeholders become visible and heard by the public. Hence, the Lennon Walls could be seen as an anti-hegemonic discourse in which controversial contents are discussed publically.

Underlying the Lennon Walls are different layers of *indexicalities*, orienting towards different centres, operating simultaneously through stratified systems. According to Blommaert (2005), the interpersonal level operated at the lowest level; the higher societal level (community level) overrides the interpersonal level, for example, by creating and using new words or expressions to signal group membership for some and for the exclusion of others; these levels may be invaded by higher societal levels (state or transnational level), for example, when the government ordered the cleanup of the Lennon Walls because they are illegal. Thus, the Lennon Walls are governed by conflicting and opposing as well as complementary ideologies that are shaped by multiple local and global forces.

6. Conclusion

As mentioned at the beginning of this study, the aim was to examine the graffiti created on certain Lennon Walls in Hong Kong in the context of the Anti-ELAB movement in 2019. As the data shows, the graffiti were predominantly written in Chinese except for 33 signs which were written solely in English or a foreign language. The data also showed some interesting examples of neologisms that reflect the sociolinguistic norms and practices of Hong Kong.

The content analysis of the graffiti shows a number of recurring themes: the Hong Kong identity, call for courage and pursuit of democracy and freedom. Adopting Kress and Leeuwen's (2006) theory of visual design and the Scollons' social-semiotic theory of multimodality (Scollon and Scollon, 2003), this study illustrates how the experience during the Anti-ELAB protests was reflected through different semiotic signs and how the diverse emotions and values driven by conflicting ideologies contribute to the overall semiotic

landscape. Through the examination of Lennon Walls, this study seeks to add a theoretical contribution to the notion of graffiti. Graffiti is an evolving concept which should not be confined to tagging or writing, it should encompass new variants such as post-it graffiti.

All of the large-scale Lennon Walls in Hong Kong were torn down by the government in February 2020, following the outbreak of the Covid-19 virus. In November 2020, a small-scale Lennon Wall appeared at the first anniversary of the ‘Safeguard CUHK’ exhibition at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Keeping track of the development of the Lennon Walls throws light on how the notion of graffiti evolves as well as how aesthetic tools can also serve as a powerful political tool in social movements.

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