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A Revolt against Chinese Intellectualism: Understanding the Protest Script in Taiwan's Sunflower Movement of 2014

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Karl Marx's famous saying that great historical events happen twice, first as tragedy and later as farce, originated from an observation of the futile attempt of French leftwing revolutionaries of 1848 to ape their predecessors in the revolution of 1789. Marx apparently considered it a paradox that a history-making intention involved borrowing "names, battle slogans, and costumes" from the past. Thus he implied a truly successful revolution would have to proceed without the nostalgic attachment to the previous protest script.

In spite of Marx's reminder, the existing protest scripts, such as marches on Washington in the United States, candlelight vigils in South Korea and mass rallies on the Ketagalan Boulevard (in front of president office) in Taiwan, bestow convenience and legitimacy to movement activists. A protest script is usually culturally embedded because it conforms to the prevalent norm and understanding of how collective defiance should be performed. Therefore, a major breakthrough in protest style usually reflects the underlying socio-cultural changes.

In the evening of March 18, 2014, a group of Taiwanese university students stormed the national legislature to protest against a free-trade pact with China. The government conducted the trade negotiation in an excessively secretive manner without proper consultation. Just when the public skepticism rose, the ruling party lawmakers railroaded the bill in 30 seconds in a flagrant violation of the promise for an article-by-article review the previous day. Unexpectedly, protest students were able to resist the police eviction and occupy the legislature for 24 days, effectively paralyzing a governmental branch and giving rise to a political crisis.

The greatest episode in the history of Taiwan's collective contention was called the Sunflower Movement because of the image of a florist's gift was captured and amplified in the mass media. Taiwan's conservative political culture tended to frown upon such massive civil disobedience, yet the Sunflower Movement managed to enjoy high public support in polls—a constraining factor for the incumbents to use force to evacuate the student occupiers. The pro-Sunflower sentiments came from skepticism over China's political intention, the defense of democratic procedure, and protectionism. In the end, although the government stood firm in its support for the disputed trade bill with China, the legislature speaker intervened by agreeing to enact a special law governing the negotiation with China before resuming the review process; consequently the students ended their occupation on April 10, claiming their initial victory.

Since I have a forthcoming paper in *Journal of East Asian Studies* which analyzes political opportunity and threat in the Sunflower Movement, this short piece will comment on its cultural aspect. Seen in the evolution of Taiwan's student activism (the Wild Lily Movement in 1990 and the Wild Strawberry Movement in 2008, in particular), there is evidently a progressive dissolution of the previously dominant script, which I call Chinese intellectualism.

Traditional Confucianism bestowed an elevated status to literati, not only because of their classical learning, but

also the fact they exemplified the nation's conscience. It was their moral duty to remonstrate against the rulers' wrongdoings, and the incidents of patriotic martyrdom were often lauded in the historical accounts. In the modern era, the literati's role was succeeded by university students. The famed May 4th Movement of 1919 was a latter-day rendition of this Chinese intellectualism. In protest against a "national humiliation" at the Versailles meeting which decided to transfer Germany's privilege in China to Japan, Beijing students led a nation-wide patriotic movement. The May 4th Movement laid the foundation for nationalism, and subsequently the communist movement elevated it to a prototype script for the Chinese intellectualism.

When Beijing students launched their pro-democracy movement in Tiananmen in Spring 1989, they clearly had the heroic 1919 precedent in mind. Students' kneeling to plead for a dialogue with the officials and their subsequent hunger strike were a powerful reenactment of this protest script. Elitism was an essential component of Chinese intellectualism since the moral right to speak the truth to the power was preserved to a selected few. It should not come as a surprise that Beijing students sought to keep a distance from the citizen supporters and showed condescending scornfulness toward the army soldiers who mostly hailed from the impoverished countryside. Readers of Craig Calhoun's masterful description in his monograph on the Beijing movement (<http://goo.gl/7lniXT>) are sure to question whether such elitist insistence on status distinction sits well with the demand on democracy.

The attempt to segregate student protestors and citizen supporters were also seen in Taiwan's student movements in 1990 and 2008. Twice the cordon line was much disputed within student activists; while its opponents denounced it as an instance of class discrimination, the supporters claimed it as a necessary measure to guard against agents provocateurs. Sympathetic citizens donated the necessary logistical supplies for students' protracted protest, however non-students were not allowed to have a say in the decision-making. Perhaps the clearest indication of Taiwanese students' sense of their particular status consisted in the effort to name their movement. The "Wild Lily" was selected in 1990 because it symbolized vitality, purity, strength and the native root, while the term "Wild Strawberry" represented not only the continuance of the 1990 movement, but also a rejection of the prevalent term "strawberry tribe", which depicted Taiwan's youth as soft and unwilling to endure hardship.

Naming revealed the students' unstated anxiety for an unambiguous identity. Playing the familiar script of Chinese intellectualism seemed to offer a sense of legitimacy especially when their disruptive protest was vulnerable to state repression. The Sunflower activists' easiness with an appellation chosen by the media, as well as their willingness to accept it—particularly when a buffoonish politician misidentified the students' sunflowers as bananas—showed the lessened feelings of anxiety. Right from very beginning, NGO activists took part in the decision-making process and there was no demarcation to separate students and non-students.

In place of the ultra-serious tone of Chinese intellectualism, the Sunflower Movement incorporated many elements from the youth popular culture. The government's response and hostile media's detraction were treated with creative playfulness (or the Japanese kuso style). Personal life details of two charismatic male students leaders, Lin Fei-fan and Chen Wei-ting, became insanely attractive to the public. Lin's Harry Potter-style glasses and green overcoat became an instant fashion, while a picture of Chen sleeping with a teddy bear on the floor of national legislature attracted the donation of more than sixty teddy bears overnight (hence the so-called "Weiting-the-Pooh"). Female supporters produced many fujoshi (rotten women) -style cartoons that depicted Lin and Chen in a homosexual fantasy (the so-called boys' love romance).

It would be expected that a movement that resisted China's greater influence over Taiwan would have self-consciously rejected the protest script inherited from the traditional Chinese culture. Nevertheless, I did not think Sunflower activists made a deliberate choice on their cultural style since they were engrossed in the strategic interaction with the government incumbents throughout the 24 days of congress occupation. More likely, the aesthetic shift reflected the change of university students' role in Taiwan's society. The expansion of higher

education in the past two decades had eroded their elite status. Since a college degree no longer promised a decent professional job, it would become anachronistically incomprehensible if student activists decided to play the role of classical intellectuals. Moreover, the prevalence of mobile digital communication and internet social media had leveled the distinction between student and non-student populations. What came in place was a shared youth activist culture in the cyberspace that is more equalitarian, creative and humorous.

In short, Chinese intellectualism was a powerful protest script because of the existence of a hierarchical social order. Once its social foundation is chipped away, newer generations of student protestors will have to devise a new language of dissents, as Karl Marx had foreseen.

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