An Artistic Response to Social Unrest in Hong Kong: Utilizing the Arts to Build Up and Sustain an Understanding and Respectful Community

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Abstract

The 2019–20 Hong Kong protests, commenced in March 2019, were triggered by the introduction of The Fugitive Offenders and Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters Legislation Bill 2019 by the Hong Kong government. In June 2019, peaceful civil disobedience escalated into violence, signalling the emergence of polarization and antagonism in the city. As of December 2019, an estimated 300,000 excess probable depressive cases and 810,000 suspected PTSD cases were associated with the 2019–20 social unrest. Furthermore with the pandemic, the hopelessness manifested in the city and citizen's mental wellbeing are of extreme concern. Given the holistic and therapeutic nature of the arts to enhance internal and external resources to achieve well-being and social cohesion, this study aims to stimulate a peaceful, candid social dialogue and explore the arts as a potential way to heal, build up, and sustain an understanding and respectful community. Specifically, through oral history interviews, this qualitative study collects narratives from 8 individuals with diverse artistic backgrounds in order to understand the social phenomenon from a grass-root perspective and explore the capacity of schools and communities to utilize the arts as a peace-building instrument in Hong Kong's context.

Keywords: *arts, peacebuilding, school, community, conflict, wellbeing, holistic education, Hong Kong*

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Shue-Kei Joanna Mok

The 2019–20 Hong Kong protests, commenced in March 2019, were triggered by the introduction of The Fugitive Offenders and Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters Legislation Bill 2019 by the Hong Kong government. The now aborted bill would have allowed extradition to jurisdictions with which Hong Kong did not have extradition agreements, including mainland China and Taiwan. Since Hong Kong has a separate legal system from the mainland and there has been a general distrust and fear of the Chinese government and systems in Hong Kong, citizens organized sit-ins and demonstrations to fight for Hong Kong's autonomy and civil liberties. A gathering outside the Legislative Council Complex to stall the bill's second reading on June 12, 2019 escalated into violence at night, signaling the emergence of polarization and antagonism in the city. Politics and police brutality have since become the most discussed topics in day-to-day conversations and citizens quickly labelled each other with colors: Yellow for people who support the protesters and blue for the ones who support the police and/or the government. Labeling has then led to name-calling, further conflicts, and deeper hatred.

According to Ni et al. (2020), an estimated 300,000 excess in probable depressive cases and 810,000 suspected PTSD cases were associated with the 2019–20 social unrest as of December 2019. Furthermore, with the pandemic, the hopelessness manifested in the city and citizen's mental wellbeing are of extreme concern (Hou et al., 2021).

Given the holistic and therapeutic nature of the arts to enhance internal and external resources to achieve well-being and social cohesion, the study aims to stimulate a peaceful, candid social dialogue and explore the arts as a potential way to heal, build up, and sustain an understanding and respectful community. Specifically, through oral history interviews, this qualitative study collects narratives from 8 individuals with diverse artistic backgrounds to understand the social phenomenon from a grassroots perspective.

Based on the interviews, Hong Kong society generally sees arts and arts education as a consumer good and pragmatic means to raise one's competitiveness and social mobility. Such a stratified, capitalist, and utilitarian view towards the arts hinders the implementation and effectiveness of holistic arts education, which directly impacts the level of difficulty in utilizing the arts as a peacebuilding instrument in context. Meanwhile, all interviewees hold a Confucian

perception towards peace. At the individual level, self-cultivation is believed to be the essence of inner peace development while an intact system and a love-for-all mindset will create a harmonious society. The disparity between the capitalistic approach to arts and the Confucian approach to peace marks an interesting yet potentially challenging opportunity to employ the arts for peacebuilding.

The current social division in Hong Kong is unprecedented and foreign, as is the discussion around peace and peacebuilding. With the government further oppressing grassroots voices and the pandemic making in-person interactions more difficult, deeper exploration is required to find the appropriate time to hold activities with different aims and themes of reconciliation and peacebuilding. In the long term, to utilize the potential of the arts for self-cultivation, holistic development, and social cohesion, our approach towards arts education must change. It should not be only about enhancing one's competitiveness and skills but focusing on one's wellbeing and encouraging self-discovery.

This qualitative study aims to stimulate a peaceful, candid social dialogue and explore a potential way to heal, build up, and sustain an understanding and respectful community. It first illustrates several chief factors which contribute to Hong Kong's complex situation and elicit the population's intense emotions, then presents how the society perceives the arts. Acknowledging the arts' potential for empowering genuine expressions, facilitating communications, and delivering therapeutic experiences, 8 dedicated individuals from various artistic backgrounds share their insights and envision the capacity for schools and communities to utilize the arts as a peace-building instrument in Hong Kong's context through in-depth oral history interviews. To illustrate the power of arts in turbulent times, this article also features all participants' artistic responses, i.e., creative work in various mediums, to the 2019-20 social unrest.

Hong Kong's Rooted Struggles

The 2019 protests manifested an immense distrust, fear, and hostility against the Chinese government. On one hand, one could interpret this sentiment in relation to an ideological clash between a capitalist city and a communist country. On the other, one could identify critical historical moments to understand the city's lacking a sense of national identity and the failure of national integration.

Through a crisis-transformation perspective, So (2011) highlighted several key moments which sow seeds of the former British colony's national identity and political crises. The first

concrete move which hindered Hong Kong-China national integration happened after the Chinese Communist Revolution in 1949. With the colonial government attempting to stop receiving refugees from China and the Chinese communist state striving to reinforce communism and reject capitalism, formal documentation was required for border crossing and direct train services were suspended. Additionally, the colonial government attempted to de-link the local economy from China, suppressed communist infiltration, promoted English as the prestige medium of instruction, and downgraded the Chinese language. While the British colonial government employed a depoliticized education to leave their authority unquestioned, it introduced concepts such as citizenship and democracy through Civic Education in 1985 after the Sino-British Joint Declaration was signed in 1984, and later through Liberal Studies in 1992. This effort in politicizing education and the active promotion of the Western liberal values by non-state actors have contributed to the complication of the conceptualization and perception of citizenship and national identity (Kennedy et al., 2007; Tse, 2007; Vickers, 2011). Influenced by the education system and the media, a new generation of Hong Kong people identifying themselves with Hong Kong, emerged and were critical of the Chinese communist government.

Despite an increase in economic activities across the borders soon after the Joint Declaration was signed, the rather positive economic integration did not come with optimistic social and political integrations. Small businesses in Hong Kong were particularly interested in moving their factories to and hiring workers in the mainland to enjoy lower operation and production costs. Such a rapid, dynamic stimulus caused a surge in the inflation rate (over 30%) in Guangdong and a sharp increase of crimes committed by recent mainland immigrants to Hong Kong. This informal social integration led to a new cultural conflict in which Hong Kong people blamed the mainlanders affecting local quality of life, declaring them uneducated. Unsurprisingly, the colonial government did not assist with the integration. The 1989 Tiananmen Incident further exacerbated Hong Kong people's fear of the return of sovereignty to China, revitalizing Hong Kong's democracy movement: the June Fourth vigil; the 2003 Article 23 national security protests; the 2012 anti-National Education protest; the 2014 Umbrella movement; and the recent 2019-20 protests (Lee, 2019).

On top of the integration failure and national identity crises, Hong Kong has been suffering from internal socioeconomic and political challenges (Wong, 2018). Socioeconomically speaking, the rapid growth of some regional cities in China has been

threatening Hong Kong's prestigious status as a prosperous international city and a regional leader in innovation and technology. As the Hong Kong local market was fragile and losing its sense of direction, more and more Chinese capital was injected into the market. Such investments have made property prices unrealistic for locals and local businesses targeting mainland tourists instead of serving local needs. There is a general feeling that the mainland has taken advantage of Hong Kong's resources and reputation to fuel its expeditious development (Lee, 2019). With the income and wealth gaps getting wider and the lack of social mobility, the saturated market and economy can no longer flourish like the 1970s, no matter how hard people work or study. The stark contrast with the work more, get more expectation has made the young generation frustrated and hopeless, leading them to turn to post-materialist values (Pang & Jiang, 2019), believing that a structural, political reform is the only way out. Together with the opaque and highly unstable political situation, the 2019-20 protests acted as an outcry over all the long-lasting struggles. Lee (2019) expressed how the political sphere was perceived to be an integral part of Hong Kong's identity and the last hope of embracing that identity:

> Developing in tandem with de-democratization was a palpable erosion of Hong Kong's core political values: rule of law, independent judiciary, due process, civil liberty, and freedom of the press. (...) These core liberal values are deeply entrenched in the mentality of Hong Kongers, who in opinion polls consistently rank "rule of law" and "freedoms" higher in priority than "one person one vote." To their dismay, except for the first few years after 1997, China mounted serious assaults against these cherished ways of life. (pp. 6-7)

With both the city and the people struggling to muddle through, the arts serve as a unique lens to capture and visualize the dynamics and sentiments on the ground. Having laid out the background of the protests and some underlying struggles and tensions in the city, the following sections explore the concepts of peacebuilding and the arts and what they mean in Hong Kong's context.

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Peacebuilding and the Arts

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According to Johan Galtung (1969), negative peace refers to the pure absence of violent conflict whereas positive peace refers to a harmonious state due to the absence of direct, structural, and cultural violence. The latter envisions an overarching, inclusive peace with equity and harmony as two salient components. Peacebuilding seeks to utilize creative approaches to

realize conflict transformation. The essence is to create structures and cultural practices to empower all members of a society to reach their full human potential (Coy, 2009). Specifically, Shank and Schirch (2008) shared stories from Mexico, Ghana, South Africa, the United States, Bosnia, Pakistan, and Venezuela to illustrate how arts-based approaches can strategically facilitate conflict transformation. The piece detailed different forms of art for peacebuilding, when to employ which art forms, and how the proposed art-based approaches are powerful and can be contextually ambidextrous. The four broad approaches to strategic arts-based peacebuilding are categorized as: (1) waging conflict nonviolently; (2) reducing direct violence; (3) transforming relationships; and (4) building capacity.

The first two approaches focus more on the conflict itself. The concept of waging conflict nonviolently relates to raising public awareness. By expressing ideas through various art forms such as spoken word, hip-hop, documentary filmmaking, public murals, and invisible theater, etc., artists raise awareness about latent local issues and conflicts. These works and productions help magnify problems and escalate the intensity of conflicts to make the audience face and reflect on the conveyed messages. In terms of reducing direct violence, peacebuilding-oriented artistic engagements strive to provide physically and mentally safe spaces for victims of racial, political, or economic conflict. Works of all art forms can interrupt the cycle of emotional, spiritual, physical, and/or psychological violence through engaging all senses.

The other two approaches focus more on the post-conflict dimension, the process towards social transformation and justice. The fundamental concept of transforming relationships is to address personal and/or collective trauma, transform negative energy into positive energy, and make public demands for justice. With the focus on healing, the suggested art forms for transforming relationships include visual arts therapy; drama therapy; movement therapy; music therapy; playback theatre; rituals; and image theatre. Finally, the concept of capacity building speaks to the construction of just structures which support a sustainable culture of peace in post-conflict society. Here, artistic engagements, for instance forum theater and arts education programs, serve as mechanisms to help participants build self-confidence; enable self-expression; and provide training in leadership, public speaking, and creative problem solving.

Since peacebuilding is an ongoing, multifaceted, and holistic concept that should be weaved into society's social, spiritual, cultural, political, economic and developmental fabrics (Sempiga, 2017), apart from the above categorization, we can also examine how the arts can dye

the various fabrics and realize the vision of peacebuilding (Fairey, 2017). Firstly, the social facet of the arts encourages people to share, envision, and co-construct their imagined vision. Rebuilding destroyed relationships, focusing on reconciliation within society, and strengthening society's peacebuilding potential (Lederach, 1999) can all be achieved through participating in different arts engagements. In addition, it is extremely important for a post-conflict community to have active hope and a mutual vision to move forward. Not only do the arts serve as a creative means for people to imagine their preferred future, but the arts also manifests its spiritual power and mobilizes the community by uniting community members (Bakagiannis & Tarrant, 2006; Bang, 2016). Secondly, the cultural and political aspects of the arts enable the community to use inclusive and culturally relevant ways to narrate their lived experiences through various art forms. By recording and sharing people's voices, alternative perspectives and interpretations of different issues are made available, promoting social change and transformation (Kim, 2019). Finally, through actively engaging communities in programming, delivering, and participating in artistic experiences, community members will develop job skills while experiencing how the arts could facilitate self-discovery, creativity, and social cohesion (Kay, 2000). Such opportunities expose participants to a fresh idea about potential career paths and offer them an alternative way to see the connection between arts and themselves, addressing the economic and developmental values of the arts at both the social and individual levels.

Even though arts and creative practices have not yet claimed a prominent place in current policy or strategy of peacebuilding, the arts has been building its presence in non-state actors and practitioners' repertoire (Hunter & Page, 2014). In fact, non-UN initiatives and NGOs are often more effective in directing and attaining more robust social and cultural goals by integrating arts into their approaches. Cultivating and sustaining rapport takes time. Since non-state actors tend to be able to dedicate more time to understand and work with the community, they tend to have a higher flexibility and capacity to utilize the arts for peacebuilding.

Given that peacebuilding is a context-specific affair (Tschirgi, 2010), the current social unrest offers a precious opportunity for us to explore Hong Kong's pathway towards peacebuilding. Most of the existing literature discusses backgrounds and contributing factors of clashes and conflicts between Hong Kong and the Mainland with key events such as the 1997 Handover and the 2014 Umbrella Movement as entry points. The latest articles only support those well-established analyses with the 2019 protest as a timely additional example yet, overall,

there has been little research focus on peacebuilding in Hong Kong's context (Mathews, 2020; Shek, 2020). Ultimately, peacebuilding is rarely discussed in both public and academic spheres. Besides, the idea of arts being a personal or social development and empowerment medium has never been thoroughly explored and articulated in Hong Kong. Particularly, studies regarding arts education in Hong Kong primarily focus on reporting student motivation, preferences, and skills development instead of treating arts education as an indispensable element of holistic development and education for students (Chan & Chan, 2007; Leung & McPherson, 2010; Hui et al., 2015). In hopes of filling such an enormous gap, I raise three essential questions:

- How are the series of social unrest in Hong Kong perceived? How have these episodes influenced one's emotions?
- How are the arts perceived in general? What roles do the arts play during such a critical period?
- Can the arts serve as a peacebuilding instrument? If so, how can schools and the arts community make use of the arts to build up and sustain an understanding and respectful community?

The significance of this study is multifold. Firstly, the 2019 protest and the series of events followed have proved to be pivotal and traumatic to most Hong Kong people. With the Central Government's active involvement in Hong Kong on top of the unresolved conflicts, it is crucial to have preliminary work to explore the potential approach towards reconciliation and peacebuilding in Hong Kong's context to lay the groundwork for future studies and/or interventions for the perceived political awakening. Secondly, this study aims to prompt genuine reflective dialogue about Hong Kong's recent situation and envisioning the city's future. In such a highly polarized and antagonized environment, people can rarely express themselves freely without being challenged or labelled. This study serves as a neutral, open space to engage and present different ideas. It also demonstrates a collaborative effort to envision creative approaches to conflict transformation. Lastly, this study sheds light on the potential for the arts to serve as a peacebuilding instrument in a capitalistic city, and addresses the significance of arts education for a sustainable, successful conflict transformation.

Methodology

As peaceful protests turned violent along with the emergence of police brutality in Hong Kong since June 2019, the city has been filled with antagonism, hatred, rage, and desperation.

While the amount of violent clashes has declined with the unprecedented landslide victory for pro-democracy candidates in the November 2019 District Council elections (because pro-democracy parties won 17 of the 18 district councils, signaling a significant turnaround after failing to win control of a single council at the last local election in 2015), followed by a further decline due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the city is still being filled with negativity and trauma. Acknowledging the theories of conflict resolution and how the arts could be utilized as a transformative peacebuilding instrument in other countries and contexts, I wondered how Hong Kong locals perceived the city's conflicts, the meaning of arts, and the potential for the arts to serve as a peacebuilding instrument.

The study employs a qualitative approach as each interviewee's detailed perception on the 2019 social unrest, arts, peace, and peacebuilding in Hong Kong's context is the essence of the study. Such an approach recognizes that each individual offers "windows into broader social and societal conditions" (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 12). Primarily through oral history, this paper provides preliminary yet comprehensive information regarding a potential approach to make peace in Hong Kong after a series of momentous social events. Particularly, oral history is an invaluable way to record perspectives and narratives of ordinary people, whose voices are often missing in traditional written records. Historian Jan Vansina (1985) characterizes oral history as a collaborative subjectivity, where interviewees and interviewers co-construct and transmit human observations, interpretations, and emotions in the form of narrative:

> Eyewitness accounts are always a personal experience as well and involve not only perception, but also emotions. Witnesses often are also not idle standers-by, but participants in the events. Furthermore, an understanding of what happened cannot occur through mere data of perception. Perceptions must be organized in a coherent whole and the logic of the situation supplies missing pieces of observation. (p. 4)

With the study highlighting the personal and public experience of each interviewee, oral history will effectively capture and relay interviewees' interpretations of and sentiments towards the social unrest.

Within the period from mid-April to mid-May 2020, I interviewed 8 individuals, 5 female and 3 male, from diverse artistic backgrounds and disciplines. While some have multiple identities (for example, one of the interviewees is an artist, community arts practitioner, educator, and social worker), the background of my informants ranged from high school students

and teachers, and tertiary education administrator, to artists, community arts practitioners, and art therapists, practicing in various disciplines, i.e., visual art, music, dance, and photography. Purposive sampling was adopted to select informants who were active players with various arts backgrounds at different levels of the arts education scene. Since the study aims to explore the potential for the arts to attain peacebuilding at schools and community levels in Hong Kong, it is crucial to engage with people who acknowledge the power of arts and can critically articulate and evaluate the capacity for the arts in their respective contexts.

The research received ethical approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of University of Maryland, College Park. Invitations were sent to 10 identified individuals, of whom 8 agreed to take part in the interviews. All informants completed the consent forms prior to the interviews. To obtain rich and relevant data from interviews, it is important for the informants to acknowledge the goal of the study within which they are participating (Brenner et al., 1985). A casual Zoom chat was scheduled with each informant to facilitate icebreaking between the researcher and informant and serve as an opportunity for the informants to raise whatever questions they have regarding the study. As suggested by Fine and Sandstrom (1988), the interviewer should adopt the role of being a friend to interviewees during an interview. This approach promotes fertile conversations, as the interviewer interacts with the interviewees "in the most trusted way possible" (p. 17). Given that the current study touches on the interviewees' private, personal, and public experiences, a trusted relationship and a sense of respect and openness is necessary (Seidman, 2006). To have more thoughtful responses, common interview questions were sent to the informants before the interviews for preparation.

Since all interviewees speak Cantonese as their mother tongue, all interviews were conducted in Cantonese to ensure all information and sentiments were precisely communicated and captured. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and translated into English, and sent to the interviewees for member checks. Each interviewee has confirmed their corresponding transcription to ensure that their ideas were not lost in translation. To address participant safety given the political tension in Hong Kong, on top of practicing all IRB participant safety protocols, I have invited all interviewees to review this article and garnered approval to publish this writing and their artwork.

On the Ground: Post-Protest Sentiments, Arts, and Peace

All interviewees elaborated their views on three main themes: the series of social unrest in Hong Kong starting from June 2019; the perceptions of the arts and peace; and the potential for schools and the art community to utilize the arts to build up and sustain an understanding and respectful community. These ideas provide great insights on how the city might move away from conflicts and hostility. In addition, I invited these dedicated individuals to share their artwork in response to the ongoing social unrest (see Appendix). These creative expressions will provide us an alternative lens to understand their emotions, their perceptions towards the events, and their ways of employing arts.

Sentiments about the Aftermath of the Protests

To explore potential methods to build and sustain an understanding and respectful community after a series of protests and violent conflicts in Hong Kong, it is essential to first learn how the locals feel about and perceive these events. While the protests and conflicts were deemed to be unforeseen and sudden, all interviewees agreed that the social movement was an extension of the 2014 Umbrella Movement. During the recount of the incidents, all interviewees expressed various degrees of stress, frustration, and helplessness. People (self)-identify and label as yellow for supporting the protesters and blue for supporting the police and/or the government and having a calm, rational conversation across those colors was challenging. Stress was mainly induced by the interactions with family members, friends, peers, and colleagues since normal day-to-day conversations could easily turn political and provocative. According to the interviewees' experiences and observations, while some people tried to be extremely cautious about what to say and how to act to maintain a relationship, some got into endless quarrels and put the relationships to an end:

> ...oh my cousin! She personally is yellow yet both of her parents are deep blue so she doesn't dare to speak up at home. Like a few families from my father's side are blue and we are yellow so we don't discuss politics when we meet up. (0417b)

> In terms of family and friends, there are a lot of people who have polarized opinions with their family members and it makes you wonder if you could or should discuss a certain topic. You didn't have to do much thinking or consideration like this before. (0415)

A few WhatsApp groups, like a group with churchmates and a group with former colleagues, where we used to share day-to-day stories had turned political. There were everlasting discussions, quarrels, and people started leaving the groups... so some relationships have been affected indeed. (0421)

Countless discussions regarding social events and politics in different group chats have emerged since the protest. While it's good to have discussions where we all share our views and acknowledge different opinions and stances, a lot of times they end with people leaving the chats. (0521)

Frustration and a sense of helplessness were conveyed when the interviewees were narrating how they perceived the social movement. Even though some believed the protests showed solidarity and described them as a form of creative expression and a revolution towards social justice and democracy, it was evident that the chaos, violence, lack of listening and empathy for each other, and the antagonism in the society had induced trauma. Some pointed out emotional suppression as a common phenomenon among their peers. One interviewee even shared an episode when she got the privilege to leave town and had an emotional outburst due to the long-suppressed emotions. Two interviewees identified the social movement as pivotal time for a review of the society. They called the government's behavior a betrayal of the Hong Kong citizens, and further reflected on contradictions between the ideals and realities—the source of frustration:

This bill seems to unveil the body of work which the government has been doing. Hong Kong citizens, to a certain degree, have given great power and authority to the government and simply focused on making a living or purchasing a property. But then suddenly, this incident emerged and the responses of the spokesperson of the police and the government officials have been out of their mind... But you realize Hong Kong provides little education on politics and societies. There are people who have no idea how it functions... Regarding media, you know that there are different perspectives and there will be preconceived notions. However, you wouldn't realize how wild those preconceived notions are. It has completely overthrown the expectation and idea of media neutrality. (0415)

The definition and checks and balances of public authority is worth deep thoughts and reflections… One of the things that everyone, regardless of stance, has been doing is booing Lam Cheng (the chief executive). To a large extent I believe this happens because her actions and reactions fail to demonstrate thoughtfulness and clear means-and-ends relationships while exercising her power… Speaking of authority, apart from the three branches which we normally refer to, it also leads to the responsibilities of different professions. Police, journalists, and medical personnel are the professions which have played significant roles in this incident. The entire development has manifested the required professional conducts and ethics for each profession and the consequence of lacking those conducts and ethics. We all should learn from this to fully acknowledge what a certain position can/should and cannot/should not do. (0521)

Hong Kong citizens have been on a cruel emotion loop. They had been frustrated about the economic and sociopolitical situation in Hong Kong and the proposal of the Fugitive Offenders and Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters Legislation (Amendment) Bill 2019 hit them harder with a sense of betrayal and fear due to the distrust of the local and the Chinese Central governments and the trepidation of abolishing "one country, two systems," a principle which defines Hong Kong's value and status as a special administrative region (Department of Justice, n.d.). As tensions among state and non-state actors escalated, violence emerged, and police brutality surged after a series of peaceful protests (Reuters, 2020). These chaotic and violent scenes have traumatized tens of thousands of citizens, yet the government officials' reactions have further frustrated the public and intensified the sense of betrayal. Realizing and witnessing the exacerbation of systemic oppression, depressed and frustrated citizens found themselves looping in this wheel of helplessness. With some insights on how the locals are characterizing their experiences, we will move on to explore the characteristics of arts in Hong Kong's society.

Perception of the Arts in Hong Kong

Interviewees first shared their personal perception of the arts, then elaborated how the general public, schools, and the government perceived the arts in Hong Kong. With major companies fervently bringing arts installations into public spaces and shopping malls, along with Art Basel Hong Kong, H Queen's and more, Hong Kong is the undisputed center for Asia in art galleries and dealers' eyes (Napolitano, 2018). Interestingly, all interviewees stated that the arts

were not valued in Hong Kong. While most of them cherished the arts as a crucial part of humanity and a genuine, creative, and liberating means to express feelings and ideas, they felt society most often perceived arts as something distant from ordinary lives. A lot of parents encourage children to engage in artistic activities purely for increasing competitiveness to get into elite schools. Similarly, schools offer abundant arts-related extracurricular activities to students who would in turn enter different competitions to increase school reputations and polish their own resumes. Removing this utilitarian lens, the arts are simply mandatory elementary and middle school subjects which are impractical and lead to little financial return. One interviewee, who was a secondary school student, gave an interesting view on her interaction with the arts:

> Interviewee: I simply think what I've been learning is not my hobby. Like I learn to sing, take singing lessons just to earn a certificate. I enjoy singing at home alone but it's not that kind of singing.
>
> Researcher: So you're saying the enjoyable, leisure singing at home is not art.
>
> Interviewee: oh well… I guess you can say it's art…
>
> Researcher: But you've made this distinction. So, does it mean that you didn't consider it as a form of art?
>
> Interviewee: Maybe. Because I'm receiving classical singing training so perhaps that would count as art. Random singing at home, for fun, is nothing related to classical songs. Honestly, I don't really want to sing classical songs so I see them as two completely separate things.

The utilitarian approach to arts aligns well with the government's cultural policy. Again, all interviewees suggested that the government was investing in infrastructures or promoting revitalization projects such as the West Kowloon Cultural District, the Centre for Heritage, Arts and Textile, and PMQ, etc., because arts and culture is a salient feature of a metropolitan area. Not surprisingly, this market-oriented mentality favors international engagements and allows more funding and opportunities for established artists and groups for international outreach and positioning. Such measures easily explain why people in the arts business see Hong Kong as a regional gem, while the general public is indifferent to the arts. Hence, the practices have effectively hindered audience building and harmed the development and sustainability of the cultural sector. One interviewee criticized the West Kowloon Cultural District as just another property project, and highlighted how the value of arts have been twisted across the society:

I am still criticizing M+, which claims to become a world-class contemporary art museum. While it collects internationally acclaimed and renowned works, what about our local artists? No one touches on Hong Kong's local art. I don't think people are truly interested in works which do not belong to or resonate with their lives and backgrounds...

I've heard this from a while ago: Many people in Hong Kong learn to play a musical instrument as kids, but they won't even buy a ticket to appreciate a music concert when they grow up. I don't think arts education exists in this sense. It should have nurtured certain cultural cultivation, refinement, or appreciation which drives people to appreciate and expose themselves to various arts and performances. But in reality, the outcome is that people tend to perceive the Grade 8 certificate as the end game. That's it and it's as if music has nothing to do with their lives anymore. (0417a)

The pragmatic and capitalistic treatment of arts in Hong Kong echoes with the "work more, get more" expectation mentioned earlier. At the grassroots level, people believed hard work would lead to wealth and social mobility since the laissez faire, capitalistic environment prompted and actualized this societal belief during Hong Kong's industrial revolution era (the post-war period for core countries of the world-system theory) (So, 1986). Such a mentality thus favored ideas and careers which either bring tangible or immediate output and income or are elite professions or explicitly related to money-making. Arts, unfortunately, fell victim to this mindset. Therefore, grassroots tended to have limited interaction with the arts (i.e., pop songs) and perceive other forms of artistic engagement as out of reach. According to most of the interviewees' narratives, schools would reproduce, amplify, and reinforce the utilitarian treatment of arts while the government would focus more on arts business instead of local talent cultivation to secure economic success. For parents in their 30s or 40s, it is highly likely that they were the first generation in their family to have access to a more systematic arts education. For those who were privileged enough to have received private arts instruction, chances are their parents were hoping to boost their competitiveness in school when they were young, and now they are using a similar mindset to raise their own children. The expectation to enhance competitiveness and move up the social ladder was so rooted in the society that the dismantling of this societal belief played a substantial role in the outburst of the protests, along with other political, cultural, and economic reasons (Blundy, 2017; Higgins, 2019; Lau, 2017; Peter, 2019).

Regarding the relationship between the arts and the protest, all interviewees suggested that the arts have primarily served as a propaganda tool. Through Lennon walls, posters, songs, public art, public screening sessions and more, the arts have been employed to express views and emotions, raise awareness, and unite people who share the same stance. There have been a lot of artistic works narrating incidents and zooming into the subject matter to retain people's attention yet few attempt to project an end or a hopeful future. It is also important to note that while interviewees identified arts as generally beneficial to everyone (depending on the intention of the creation), they did not find it easy to make connections with the beneficial traits of the arts to the existing and potential roles for the arts at this challenging time.

Firstly, interviewees identified engaging in artistic activities as an effective and popular stress reliever. As illustrated above, Hong Kong citizens have been undergoing a tremendous amount of stress. However, only a few interviewees suggested artistic engagements as a stress reliever or acknowledged the therapeutic nature of the arts in relation to the potential role in the protest. Even though all remaining interviewees later agreed that practices such as art or expressive arts therapy could be helpful, the idea of therapy did not come to their mind as a natural thought.

Secondly, the art-making process and the engagement with art were perceived as an instrument for self-expression and self-discovery. These are steps to increase self-awareness, beneficial and critical to our wellbeing. Only two interviewees connected this idea to the role of arts. One elaborated on the physical space of art studios where people could temporarily escape from the chaos outside and paint to express or vent. The other interviewee emphasized the artmaking process of reproducing the perceived and felt on the canvas as a process of sinking in, processing, and expressing one's emotions.

Furthermore, the arts were recognized as beneficial due to its effectiveness for promoting communication among various groups and ultimately achieving social inclusion. Yet, during the time when social division was at its peak, no one mentioned the arts having the potential to achieve social inclusion. While the concept of solidarity appeared several times, it referred to the solidarity among people who shared similar views, but not the entire society:

> Some places also have *fai chun* (red banners) and red envelopes for people to take home
> for free. Like they have very cute designs and include the five demands in those. I'd
> taken some too… These are usually donation-based so they just display everything, so

much free support through art. That's great! I'm not sure if you could see this [through online sources] but it's a day-to-day experience in Hong Kong… Yellow has a lot of support like water supply and more as well so there is sufficient mutual aid for those people. (0414)

Perception of Peace

White doves flying in the blue sky; people gathering happily chatting and sharing food are common visualizations of peace. Consistent with this universal image, all interviewees shared similar ideas while imagining and describing peace. The absence of violence was believed to be paramount. Since there would be different views and agendas in a community, most interviewees acknowledged that we could only strive for fewer divisions and conflicts. In the spirit of peace by peaceful means, different parties should reach agreements through negotiation. The concept of harmony in diversity furthered the idea that we must seek common grounds while respecting and preserving differences in the community. These were few of the fundamentals of a respectful and inclusive society. Directly reflecting on the recent protests, one interviewee suggested that peace should mean a state which would be free from any form of coercion and suppression whereas two highlighted the importance for one to comply with his or her personal and professional roles, duties, and responsibilities in the society. The wide range of responses addressed the concept of negative peace and demonstrated some aspirations to seek positive peace.

As conveyed by Johan Galtung (1969), equity and harmony are the two basic components of positive peace. Such an idea indicates that peace must be addressed at both individual and societal levels. First, interviewees pointed out five critical components which contribute to inner peace and positive peace at the individual level: love; humbleness; knowledge; self-cultivation; and positivity. Love, which encompasses love for others and love for oneself, was considered as the prime component. It prompts one to respect each other, be tolerant, and leads to the required patience for understanding and accepting one another. Similarly, these practices shall be applied to oneself introspectively so one can demonstrate self-compassion. By being kind and candidly accepting oneself as it is; recognizing that suffering and personal inadequacy is part of humanity; and being mindful about the balance of one's emotions, these practices pave ways to attain inner peace and concurrently empower one to have more internal resources to show compassion and care for others.

Having collected the internal resources, humbleness follows as the second component. With respect and patience for others, humbleness is necessary for one to reach out and take in other people's stories and perspectives. As mentioned by the interviewees, openness was another critical element as one needs the willingness to listen, express, and clarify; in other words, to engage in a genuine conversation with others to fully acknowledge and understand different people's ideas.

Here then leads to the third identified component: knowledge. Through formal education, interactions with the surroundings, and the constant engagement with different dialogues, one begins to accumulate enough knowledge to understand the causes of differences between people, thus develops greater tolerance for differences, or even embraces differences. Another facet of knowledge is self-regulation and morals and ethics. Most of the interviewees mentioned that one's personality and moral character play a huge role in peace at both individual and societal levels. Particularly, one should be self-aware, and be knowledgeable about morals and ethics and self-regulation practices. These types of knowledge are essential as they impact the quality of inner peace, interpersonal interactions, and relationships.

Self-cultivation came as the fourth component, encompassing the previous three elements. Through inner dialogues and interactions with the outside world, the journey of self-discovery and self-expression facilitates self-understanding, further guiding oneself to finding a place and relationship with the world. Extensive interactions and involvement in one's community develops a sense of belonging, motivates one to contribute to the greater good of the society, reinforces love for others, improves openness, and drives the appetite for more knowledge and self-enrichment for transformative change.

Finally, positivity was considered an important component of peace at the individual level. It resonates well with the turbulent situation in Hong Kong, reminding us that while the community should demonstrate resilience, solidarity, and perseverance to attain and sustain peace, everyone has his or her own means and position to contribute to a peaceful society.

At the societal level, interviewees named two categories of vital components of peace: communication and infrastructure. Resonating with the mentioned idea about genuine communication, this concept extends to communication among social groups with different agendas and interests. Many interviewees drew specific ingredients of genuine communication from the 2019 protests: empathy; a genuine interest in engaging in dialogues and understanding

group differences; an awareness of emotions and language use to precisely express a view and rationale; and groups of active listeners and reflective responders. All interviewees believed that only through mediation and rational dialogues could there be a silver lining in collective efforts: all parties working towards a common, agreed-upon goal for the greater good.

The other social component of peace is infrastructure, referring to the systems and institutions which influence the peaceful state of a society. Rudimentarily, basic needs of all people must be fulfilled. Next, intact legislative and judicial systems are necessary to perform checks and balances; create a fair and just society; and ensure equity across all walks of life. An independent mechanism should be introduced to further safeguard equity and core values of the society. One interviewee elaborated this point with the Equal Opportunities Commission, an independent statutory body which investigates complaints, facilitates mediation, and takes legal action against offenders of the Sex, Race, Disability, and Family Status Discrimination Ordinances in Hong Kong. Apart from having the necessary system, ultimately a society needs to have a leader who is truly of the people and for the people. Otherwise, any intact system could be confronted, and personal and social peace challenged.

While it appeared that at first interviewees tended to have a perception of peace which aligned more with the idea of negative peace, the core of positive peace, equity and harmony, was well addressed as we dived into the components of peace in more detail.

Potential for Schools and Communities to Utilize the Arts

Having understood how Hong Kong locals perceived peace, we now explore if the interviewees recognized any potential for schools and communities to utilize the arts to build and sustain a respectful and understanding community after the protests. All interviewees suggested that schools and community centers or art groups could organize a series of activities to provide a space for people to safely express themselves and realize different perspectives and behind-the-scenes stories. Examples include artmaking and sharing sessions; photo exhibitions and discussions; and forums. It is important to note that these activities must be interactive to be effective. Here's one interviewee's elaboration on the format of a proposed discussion session:

> Let's say we first give them the background of the event which had inspired that artist to create the discussed work. The participants of the discussion will have different takes regarding the artist's approach and the representation of the event. During this discussion, the participants would be engaged through discussing other people's work and their own

ideas: "If it's you, how would you approach certain things?", "I have just been through a similar experience. If I were there, I would...", "Based on that, let's say we need to create a song, how shall we proceed? How do you wish to approach it?", etc. Perhaps people could work towards peacebuilding as we discuss, or at least they could share some kind of understanding or a space for communication... (0415)

This example provided opportunities for participants to practice role-taking and reflective thinking. The constructive questions welcome participants to respond freely and encourage a variety of inputs. Such an approach does not only allow as many diverse perspectives as possible, but also facilitates the development of conflict resolution skills. Most interviewees pointed out how Hong Kong citizens had been antagonizing people who held different opinions and had been eager to force people to change their minds. If their attempts failed, they would either physically or verbally attack each other or walk away from the relationship. The arts play a significant role here due to its embedded ambiguity and flexibility. Since there are countless possibilities and interpretations of an art piece and each person would have his or her own approach to present a certain idea through the arts, these discussion sessions are helpful exercises for one to practice how to handle ambiguity and embrace diversity. Several interviewees also added that it would be beneficial to have social workers or counselors on site as additional support.

Apart from nurturing a more open-minded community, another example shed light on how to initiate communication through the arts. While the program illustrated below had no connection with the protest, nor with a peacebuilding or social cohesion purpose in mind, it is an invaluable reference for our idea bank given that innumerable relationships had been damaged due to disagreements and quarrels:

We've organized a workshop called 全家福 (family photo 'fortune'). We collaborated with a youth center and recruited a group of teenagers for the project. After receiving some initial training about techniques and knowledge about photography, the teenagers were asked to go home and take a family photo. Through this project, the relationship between the two generations was built. For some, they might not have much to say or share with their parents and the participation in this workshop becomes an opportunity for them to initiate communications. Apart from the family photo, the participants also wrote short reflections regarding the experience, which were very positive. I believe it's

the power of photography as a medium: to establish relationships and build

communications. (0417a)

Perhaps engaging in some art-related activities which focus on processing emotions induced by the upheaval should be the first and foremost task. One of the interviewees, who was an art therapist, shared that family members, schoolteachers, and leaders of community programs would most likely avoid mentioning what had been happening in the society, making it extremely difficult for the ones in need to simply talk to someone about their views and struggles. The specific room for art therapy was like a refuge which served as a physical space for one to vent or process information and be heard.

Challenges and Implications for Arts Education and the Society

Based on the above suggestions, all interviewees recognized the potential for the arts to nurture necessary traits for peacebuilding. Indeed, they covered elements of all four strategic approaches suggested by Shank and Schirch (2008). However, they also mentioned several challenges about implementing those ideas. I will first address some of the concerns which were brought up by the interviewees regarding the orchestration and implementation of the peacebuilding initiatives in school and communities, then discuss the implications for arts education and the society.

Challenges

Although education is intrinsically political, schools are generally believed to be an apolitical space. School administrators and teachers tend not to promote discussions around political issues so as to stay safe from controversies. Since a lot of the protestors, especially the ones who engaged in the violent clashes, were secondary and college students, schools have been under close watch by the government and certain media agencies and organizations regarding teaching content and activities. For instance, an English teacher could be teaching poetic devices and poem structures, and asked students to compose a poem to demonstrate their understanding and express themselves. If a student's work was inspired by the protest, it could very likely be discouraged or even reported. Not only does such censorship cause harm to academic freedom, it diminishes the value of arts as a liberating, self-expressing medium.

Putting the sensitivity issue and social pressure aside, one interviewee suggested that pedagogy would be a challenge. This concern refers to arts sharing and discussions as

opportunities for participants to practice role-taking, perspective-taking, empathy, and acknowledging different perspectives:

> They (students) might not be able to take in or accept the information. Perhaps it's the pedagogy that needs to be modified. Instead of teachers searching information and feeding it to students, students should search for things which support their perspectives and bring it to the classroom for discussion. Through this exchange, students can learn how different households or families see this (the series of social unrest) and how the media reports events. This might be easier to convince them. While students could be highly influenced by their family, I believe they are indeed rather open, pure, or less stubborn regarding certain topics or issues. (0415)

The effectiveness of the modified pedagogy would depend on multiple factors, including teacher perception, student engagement, class size, and preparation time. Firstly, some teachers do not agree with the contemporary art approaches or are simply reluctant to add new components into their current practices. The interviewee pointed out that the traditional knowledge transmission approach and skills-based focus would not fully enable the arts to be a medium for self-expression and self-discovery. Secondly, as students are so used to and so dependent on teachers' knowledge transmission, it is challenging for them to resist the right vs. wrong mindset and embrace ambiguities embedded in the nature of the arts. While discussing the arts as a wonderful opportunity for students to exercise dealing with ambiguities and multiple perspectives, huge class size and comparatively short class times will make it more challenging to put into practice. Furthermore, grade levels determine topics of discussion and the approaches to those discussions. It could increase workloads and burden teachers, especially those unfamiliar with the issues or the pedagogy.

At the community level, most of the interviewees expressed concerns about resources: the insufficient provision of expressive arts therapists, social workers, and counselors; funding for organizations to put the activities forward; and the background and affiliation of the organizers. At the time of this writing, there are fewer than 80 registered music therapists; around 30 art therapists who possess the academic requirement of international art psychotherapy standards; several dance and movement therapists; and a few drama therapists in Hong Kong. Besides, domestic violence cases have surged since the emergence of the pandemic. Since the

social conflict is ongoing, domestic violence cases are now the priority for social workers and counselors, leaving even fewer human resources to attend to the protest-related cases.

In terms of financial resources, most arts groups rely on funding from the government through the Leisure and Cultural Services Department; Hong Kong Arts Development Council; or the Hong Kong Jockey Club to operate or initiate new projects. On one hand, the Jockey Club has been providing more support to projects and initiatives that are related to mental health in recent years, which is beneficial to the state of the society. On the other hand, practical programs which utilize the arts to address mental health wellness and conflicts can hardly be found. Meanwhile, the government demonstrates little intention to promote reconciliation and peacebuilding in the society. Such a trend pushes passionate artists and arts groups to seek additional external funding sources outside of the two main funding bodies, which is extremely difficult under the current circumstances with the social climate and the pandemic.

In relation to the social climate, interviewees also mentioned that the background and affiliation of the program organizers would make recruiting participants and attaining the goal of peacebuilding complicated. Since the society is highly divided and antagonized, the general public is very alert and sensitive about organizers' backgrounds and affiliations. While the nature of the program could be neutral and inclusive, the affiliation of the organizers will affect how potential participants perceive the program. As a result, one could only attract people who share the same views or stance. Even when the organizer is not labeled as supportive of a certain side, arts organizations and community centers tend to have a rather limited, regular group of participants. In any case, the nature of arts groups and community centers poses several limitations to utilize the arts as a peacebuilding instrument.

Most arts groups partner with schools to bring quality and diverse artistic experience to schoolchildren. As mentioned above, since adopting modified pedagogical approaches can be challenging, inviting art groups to schools to conduct workshops and perform for/with students is an effective way to complement schools' arts curriculum, enriching the experience and adding flexibility to the program. Thus, insufficient funding for art groups does not only hamper the development of the arts community but also brings down the overall quality of the provision of arts engagement at school.

Implications for Arts Education and the Society

　　The capitalistic approach to the arts and arts education is failing us. Across all interviews, there was a well-articulated, shared vision about how arts education should be, but the utilitarian, capitalistic approach has been so institutionalized that such vision becomes extravagant and dreamy. It is a reasonable frustration as the city does have the capacity to utilize the arts to promote self-cultivation and become an authentic cultural hub.

　　All students are receiving 9 years of visual arts and music education during the years of compulsory education. With more and more schools incorporating drama into English teaching, the artistic exposure that students receive at school, in theory, is substantial — an achievement that not a lot of cities or countries could attain. Beyond the school hours, the instrumental classes, choirs, orchestras, arts clubs, drama classes, dance classes and more fill up students' timetables. Numerous charities and NGOs have been striving to provide quality arts-related extracurricular experiences to the disadvantaged population, making arts rather accessible for students across all backgrounds. All these resources, energy, and dedication from the arts scene prove that there are tremendous potentials for the envisioned to become reality.

　　It is essential for us to rethink the goal of (arts) education and the role of the arts in society. Particularly, recognizing how the arts is a genuine and effective means to encourage open-mindedness and multiperspectivity is core for us to build up and sustain an understanding and respectful community. At the school level, addressing pedagogical challenges would be a long process. Meanwhile, focusing on engaging with quality arts programs provided by professional artists could be a good point to start. These artistic encounters outside of the school curriculum provide a more flexible space for teachers and students to explore under the artists' guidance, becoming more at ease with uncertainties and ambiguities. Here are some questions which I find helpful for educators and artists who are planning constructive artistic engagements in both formal and non-formal educational settings:

- Why do you select this specific theme(s) for the exhibition or the concert?
- What message would you like to bring to the audience? What do you want them to walk away with?
- How is this engagement connected with the participants' lived experience?
- Is there sufficient space for participants to engage in self-expression and self-discovery?

- Is it a safe environment (i.e., respectful, open, non-judgmental, and culturally sensitive) for a candid dialogue?

At the societal level, not only does the accessibility of art need to be retained and expanded, but the nature of those arts encounters must also be more diversified and interactive. In other words, artists could showcase their work and interact with the public more in public spaces while businesses and galleries could collaborate with schools and nonprofits to feature different exhibitions and performances through discussion, sharing, and hands-on sessions. Instead of having an award ceremony at a mall celebrating students' painting skills with long speeches from the organizers and handshakes with the award presenters, those students could share stories behind their works and have conversations with the audience. These are wonderful opportunities to interact with people from all walks of life.

Nevertheless, attention should be on providing safe spaces for participants to reflect on what has happened and process the sentiments. As discussed, one needs to be calm and rational to engage in genuine conversations where emotions do not override the precision of one's expression. At the time of this writing, the only program that has come to my notice is T2T (From Trauma to Transformation), which focuses on supporting and handling the emotional aftermath of young frontliners in the protests through organizing arts workshops, collecting narratives, and more. Offering similar activities to different target groups is the next step toward initiating dialogue and reconciliation process.

Limitations

This study has a major limitation. The interviews were conducted from mid-April to May 2020. Since then, the political environment has drastically changed, such as the implementation of a new national security law and further oppression of free speech. Even though this paper includes updates from interviewees, striving to present the most recent and realistic picture, the challenges mentioned in the paper could be a lot tougher on the ground.

Conclusion

The potential for the arts to facilitate peacebuilding in Hong Kong due to its holistic and inclusive nature is well-acknowledged by eight locals who are actively engaged in artistic activities through different positions. However, the government does not seem to share the same idea. While non-state actors have proven to be more active and effective in utilizing art-based peacebuilding strategies, most of those potential actors are highly dependent on government

subsidy and funding. With the government demonstrating little intention to encourage reconciliation and peacebuilding and little value on arts for human development, it is challenging to fully utilize the arts for peacebuilding especially in terms of capacity building. Nevertheless, while frustrated, all interviewees remained faithful in the power of arts. They stayed committed to their work, earnestly employed the arts to promote their beliefs, and strived to utilize the potential of the arts to empower their students and their community members.

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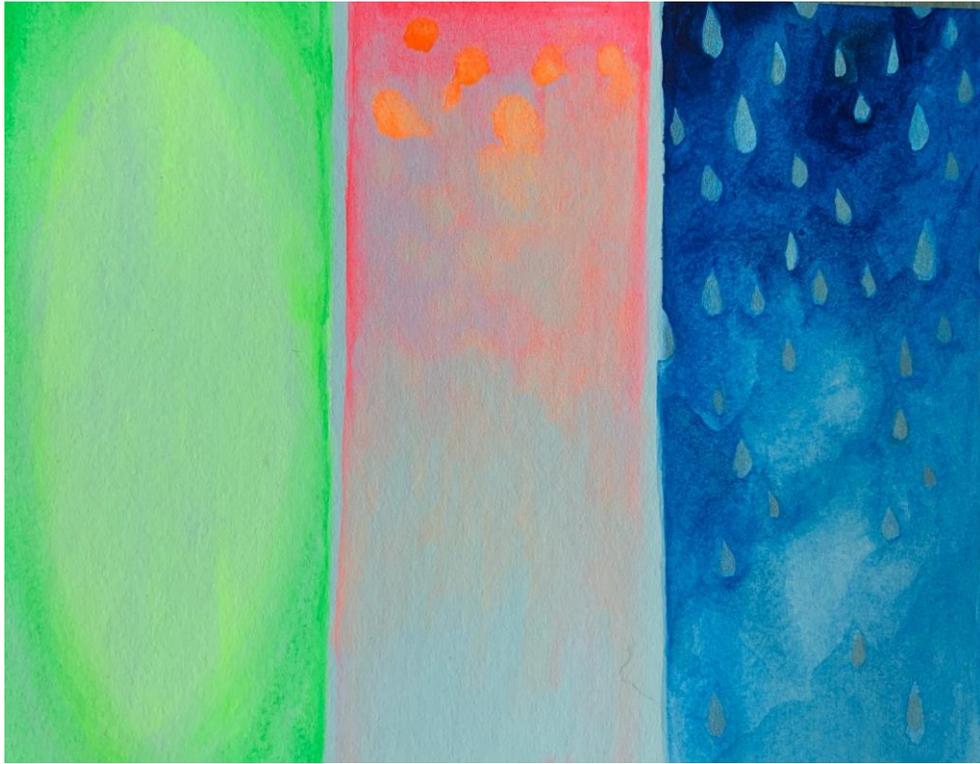Wong, Y. C. R. (2018). *Fixing Inequality in Hong Kong*. Hong Kong University Press.

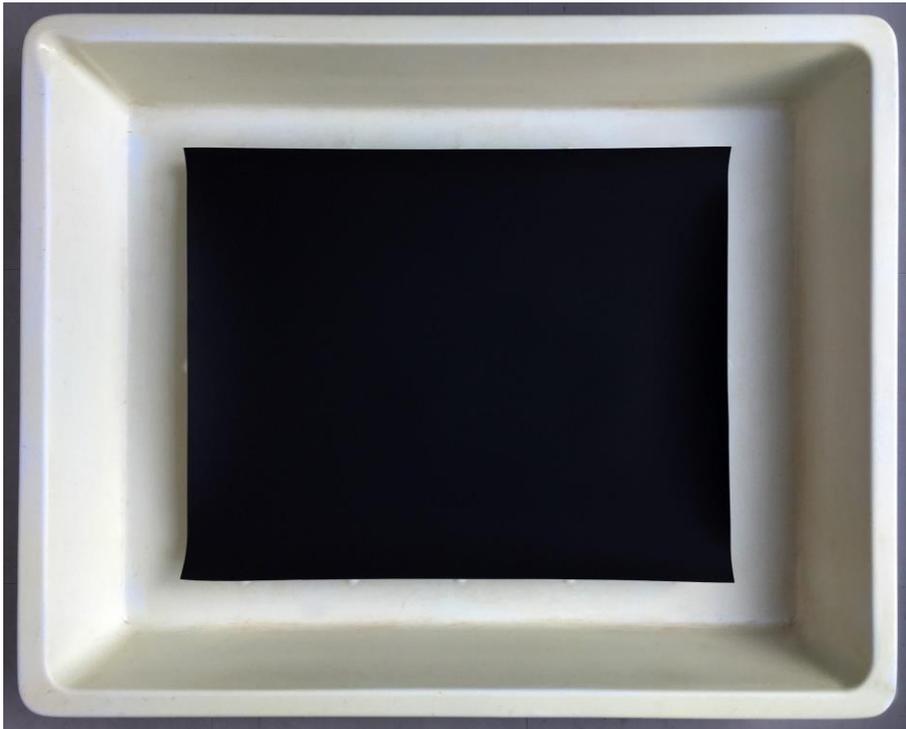**Appendix: Artistic Responses from Participants**

The Land of Floating Islands. Watercolor on paper. (2020)

The Tale of Imagined Truths. Watercolor on paper. (2020)

And So We Sink. Watercolor on paper. (2020)

黑暗中有光 *Light in The Dark*. Silver gelatin print. (2019)

我又填
夕爺面前班門弄斧了

成立規例　中小幼亦不可違規
同學們聽到記住肅立別坐低
義勇軍唱法不齊　不但失禮
有天拘捕了　你別說不抵

藏在心底　這心態是否真回歸
如上頭只靠重罰去維護國體
若要有愛國氛圍　不做姿勢
請先尊重　香港另一制

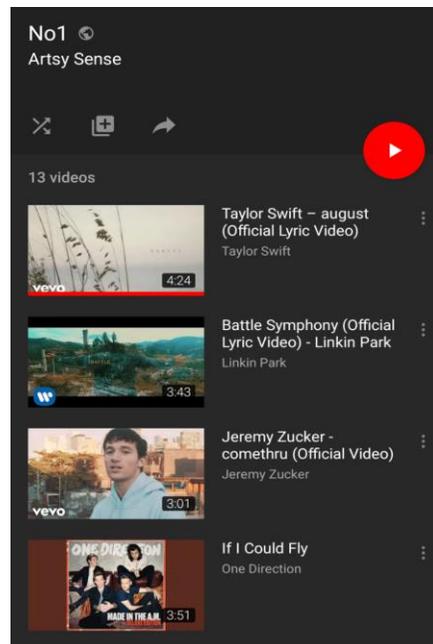*National Anthem Ordinance*. Lyric revision. (2019)

Inspired by the long-distance communication with altered lyrics of the same song *Promise* between the ex-legislator Nathan Law, and the renowned Hong Kong lyricist Albert Leung.

My Playlist to Get Through 2019-2020. Music Playlist. (2020)

https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PlvwFU9n-VauQnIxeattIAJ9tq2WK-w6VUP

On Display, Hong Kong, China (an excerpt from On Display Global 2019). Film. (2019)
https://vimeo.com/376044293 (54:16 – 55:22)

As Freedom I. Oil on panel. (2020)

As Freedom II. Oil on panel. (2020)

Merry Christmas. Oil on panel. (2020)

手 *Sau2* (Hand). Oil on panel. (2020)

足 *Zuk1* (Foot). Oil on panel. (2020)

*sau2 zuk1 手足 in Cantonese means comrade