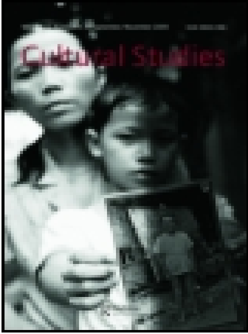

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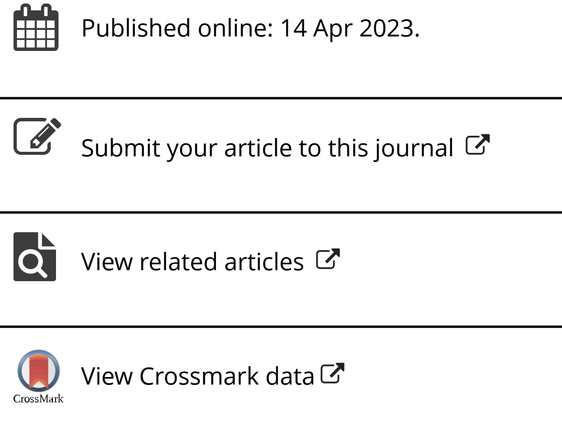

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Being water: protest zines and the politics of care in Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

During the 2019 Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill (Anti-ELAB) protest, Hong Kong protesters invented, adapted, and deployed a variety of decentralized grassroots tactics of resistance. While understudied, the proliferation of protest zines during the Anti-ELAB movement contributed to an affective community among movement supporters and protesters, allowing them to engage in self- and communal care as they resisted state violence. We argue that protest zines foregrounded a grassroots community of care that encourages political change in the following ways: expand the emotional habitus among protesters and movement supporters to accommodate debilitating bad feelings; promote self-care and embodied emotional reflection as a form of resistance against state violence; contribute to voluntary kinship among protesters beyond the state-sanctioned nuclear family model; and articulate nuclear familial relations as a site of political resistance. By examining how protest zines articulate voluntary kinship among movement supporters, we illustrate how the zines challenge dominant paternalistic institutions to reimagine a more open political future.

KEYWORDS Zines; social movement; Hong Kong; care; kinship; print activism

Introduction

During the 2019 Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill (Anti-ELAB) protest, Hong Kong protesters invented, adapted, and deployed a variety of decentralized grassroots tactics of resistance to demand political freedom. Existing studies have examined the ways in which protesters made use of everyday materials and digital platforms to counter state suppression, and to mobilize, advocate, and promote the movement (Lee *et al.* 2019, Au 2020, Urman *et al.* 2021).[1] In addition to allowing protesters to confront and evade the police despite their gross mismatch of power, many grassroots tactics focused on cultivating a community of care among protesters and movement supporters (Simon 2021, Wang 2021). While understudied, the proliferation of protest

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zines during the Anti-ELAB movement strengthened the affective community among movement supporters and protesters, inviting them to further engage in self- and communal care as they resisted state violence.

The Anti-ELAB Movement is often hailed as the 'Water Revolution' because of its adherence to the martial arts star Bruce Lee's 'Be Water' tactic (Ting 2020). The 'Be Water' motto informed decentralized guerilla protest tactics. Instead of occupying any one area for long, digitally savvy citizens engaged with each other in largely ad hoc and networked forms of pop-up protest to avoid being identified and captured by the increasingly heavy-handed police force. The 'be water' tactic highlighted the creative, ethical and political potential of fluid bodies (Ting 2020). While 'be water' was best known as a protest tactic against state surveillance and the anti-riot police, it also informs everyday practices of communal care among movement supporters and protesters. Marginalized scholars and activists in queer, transformative, and disability justice have articulated the importance of communal care and mutual aid as a response to the inhumane and unliveable realities dominated by oppressive institutions (Levin *et al.* 2020, Malatino 2020, Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018). While Hong Kong protesters were not in direct conversations with these justice movements, their tactics of communal care demonstrate how, without intimate personal knowledge of one another, decentralized care at the grassroots level could be mobilized to resist state violence and build solidarity in an anti-authoritarian movement.

In the Anti-ELAB Movement, supporters and protesters were not connected through intimate personal ties as most did not know each other's identity (*Revolution of our times* 2022). Nevertheless, they formed a fluid community of care with one another by attending to each other's bodymind amidst the shared struggles against state violence. Informed by the 'be water' ethos, movement supporters provided different forms of care based on their respective abilities. For example, in response to the many youth protesters who were disowned or attacked by their pro-government family, movement supporters created an adoptive parent network that paired expelled youths with politically like-minded adults who would provide emotional and financial support (Wang 2021). Volunteer-run message groups on Telegram kept watch on real-time police actions and arrests and coordinated transportations to help keep frontline protesters safe (Lai 2019). Without explicit organization, many movement supporters – many of them older – frequently waited outside courthouses for hours to show care and support for arrested frontline protesters, letting them know that they were not alone. Medical professionals created underground networks to treat injured protesters, so they did not have to risk arrest at government-run hospitals and clinics (Yam 2021). Taken together, movement supporters formed a community of care that attended to the bodily,

emotional, and political and legal needs of frontline protesters, many of whom lack access to institutional resources and support.

As craft media produced by and circulated among movement supporters, we argue that protest zines contributed to this decentralized community of care by amplifying alternative forms of relating to oneself and to one another to promote collective healing, resistance, and solidarity. Protest zines serve as connectors that link strangers through shared emotions and affective expressions. Existing research on affect and social movements has focused on the collective effervescent of protests, and on public displays of emotions on digital platforms. Our analysis of zines extends this conversation by examining print media that are circulated both in-person and online to support a grassroots anti-authoritarian movement (Jasper 1998, Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira 2012).

Hong Kong scholar Kin-Long Tong (2020) and scholars who have studied zines in other contexts (Licona 2013, Radway 2016, Gray *et al.* 2021, French and Curd 2022) have focused on the ways in which zinesters deploy 'DIY print activism' (Tong 2020, p. 67) to resist dominant institutions and narratives and to cultivate a more democratic society. We extend this line of scholarship by examining the emotional and affective functions of protest zines, illustrating how zines foreground the existing community of care that helped support protesters' wellbeing. While previous scholarship on zines has argued that zines are an underground individualist production that does not address change at the structural level (Atton 2001, Duncombe 2008), we disagree. Instead, we posit that protest zines contributed to the grassroots community of care in Hong Kong during the Anti-ELAB movement, and promoted political change in the following ways: they expand the emotional habitus among protesters and movement supporters to accommodate debilitating bad feelings; promote self-care and embodied emotional reflection as a form of resistance against state violence; uplift the voluntary kinships among protesters beyond the state-sanctioned nuclear family model; and articulate nuclear familial relations as a site of political resistance.

We demonstrate in our analysis of Hong Kong protest zines that these artworks, however imperfectly, contributed to the community of care among movement supporters, prompting zinesters and readers to process the drastic political and personal changes they were experiencing and creating through the Anti-ELAB Movement, while remaining attuned to their own and each other's wellbeing. By tending to movement supporters' feelings and their need for communal support, such acts of care were also resistive against state violence that dehumanizes protesters. This article also contributes to scholarships on kinship and family, and mutual aid. First, while scholars acknowledge that voluntary kin is common among marginalized groups, most existing studies on voluntary kinship and chosen families focus primarily on LGBTQ + communities (e.g. Nicolazzo *et al.* 2017, Hull and Ortyl 2019, Levin *et al.* 2020).

Our study on protest zines and voluntary kinship among protesters expands the scope of voluntary kinship to protesters and activists who experience rampant political repression and state violence that drastically alter their relationship with the government, their existing family, and each other.

The aforementioned body of scholarship, along with studies on nationalism, have illustrated that the structure of biological nuclear families often reproduces paternalistic state ideologies that further the marginalization of non-normative bodies (Wingard 2013, Yam 2019). By examining how protest zines spotlight voluntary kinship among movement supporters and highlight 'parallel resistance' between domestic and state authoritarianism (Tsang and Wilkinson 2022, p. 312), we illustrate how the zines challenge dominant paternalistic institutions to reimagine a more open political future. In what follows, we will first review existing scholarships on zines, particularly how zines serve as vehicles of social change. We then situate Hong Kong protest zines in relation to the Anti-ELAB movement. The primary analysis that follows is presented in two segments, focusing respectively on the articulation of communal and self-care, and the resistive potential of voluntary kinship and nuclear families.

Zines as grassroots resistance

Zines are often theorized as 'resistive texts' that challenge mainstream media narratives, offering alternative social frameworks as counter-cultural productions and responses to social contexts (Licona 2013, Kempson 2015, Nijsten 2017). Zine makers turn to self-publishing for a variety of reasons: for personal expression, as a creative outlet, out of isolation, as a supportive space and network tool in search of like-minded friends and community, and as a form of cultural resistance and political critique deployed by marginalized communities (Schilt and Zobl 2008, pp. 182-185). Zine-making allows marginalized non-normative communities to craft counterstories that refute dominant narratives (Farmer 2013, Martinez 2020). Scholars in recent years have argued for taking zines more seriously as tools for cultural and political expression and intervention, particularly for queer people of colour (Goulding 2015, Boatwright 2019, Guzzetti 2022). Existing research brings to the fore the transformational potential of zines as a tool for mobilization, community-building, and self-affirmation against dominant marginalizing narratives and institutions.

In an age of electronic media, when the future of the book itself is often called into question, zines – paper artefacts, usually made by hand, with little financial incentive – endure. Kin-long Tong (2020) posits that movement scholars may have underestimated the persisting relevance of zine production, which differs from mainstream print media in terms of purpose, target audience and mode of production. The aesthetic decisions that underpin zine-making necessitate 'not only intentionality but also care,' as zines position readers 'as friends, equals, members of an embodied community

who are part of a conversation with the zine maker' (Piepmeier 2008, pp. 221, 227). This intimate DIY characteristic allows protest zines to function as a form of mutual aid and care among zinesters and protesters, helping resist the dehumanizing force of state violence and suppression.

Protest zines in Hong Kong

Zines became part of the assemblage of the movement that underscores the 'Be Water' ethos. In Hong Kong, while zinesters from collectives like ZineCoop or Display Distribute have long been making zines and promoting zine culture, zines took on new significance and gained traction during the Anti-ELAB Movement. Shortly after the protests began in June, zines of all shapes and sizes began circulating, including zines that explain the protests to international English-speaking readers and zines that document the movement, providing an alternative, personal archive. There are also zines that serve as a practice in care, exchanging solidarity, information, support, even comfort, care, and understanding among zinesters and their readers.

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Zines were sold in local independent bookstores dotted across Hong Kong, such as Odd One Out, Art and Culture Outreach (ACO), Kubrick, Book Punch, and Mosses. These bookstores, some of which frequently host community book launches, workshops, art exhibitions, and talks, attract a clientele that consists of many scholars, writers, artists, as well as students and activists. While certain zines might be out of print and no longer available for purchase, they may be accessed through Asia Art Archive's (AAA) zine collection, which is freely available from either AAA's website or onsite library. Besides being sold in local indie bookstores, zines were also photocopied and distributed widely through zine exhibitions or fairs worldwide. For example, during the Anti-ELAB Movement, ZineCoop exhibited over fifty protest zines in a travelling exhibition to countries such as Canada, France, Taiwan, and the United Kingdom.

Besides traditional channels of distribution, digital technologies are increasingly integral to both the material and cultural practices of zine production and consumption. Some zines are sold online through websites or social media pages. ZineCoop, which has over 11,600 followers on Instagram,

runs an online shop, accessible through both their Instagram and website. Indie bookstores such as Odd One Out, Kubrick, and Mosses, each with a sizeable following on their respective Instagram accounts, operate online shops that sell zines as well. Zines are also often freely distributed under the creative common licensing of CC-by-ND, downloaded and printed via a shared cloud folder, or found in the form of QR links on social media platforms of artists and zine presses (Tong 2020). For example, artist Humchuk uploaded his zine, *Post-Protest Emotions*, to Facebook to be viewed and downloaded for free; the Facebook post was met with an outpouring of support, garnering over 13,000 likes, over 700 comments, and 12,000 shares. A group of Hong Kong volunteer translators subsequently translated the zine from Chinese into English and shared the PDF file on their Facebook to be downloaded for free. Humchuk's illustrated zines can also be found on his Instagram, which boasts 30,000 followers. *Me and My Parents Go Protesting*, a zine illustrated by Jason Li and edited by Vincy Chan in 2019, is available freely on Facebook as well. Both zines, among others, have been picked up and circulated by pro-democracy news outlets and media platforms, such as *HKET*, *Hong Kong In-media*, *HK01*, *The Tyee*, and *The Reporter*.

This fluid and DIY mode of circulation makes possible a wider readership, allowing zinesters, as Tong argues, 'to instantly respond to the ongoing political crises, and fosters a greater extent of communicative participation in the [Anti-ELAB] social movement' (2020, p. 67). During the protest, 'dropbox circulation' was the preferred method of zine distribution for the protest-themed zines in the Anti-ELAB Movement, whereby anyone can freely download and print zines via the use of digital storage spaces such as Dropbox (Tong 2020, p. 72). For Tong, zines resist the authoritarian logic of neoliberal capitalism and can be perceived as 'a democratic object against the mainstream media as well as the authoritarian government in Hong Kong' (2020, p. 69). This decentralized mode of circulation allowed zines to function as part of a grassroots community of care – created, distributed, and read by and among protesters and movement supporters, proffering an alternative politic of relating to one another in the community.

Zines' function in sustaining a grassroots community of care became more important after the passage of the Hong Kong National Security Law (NSL) in June 2020. Criminalizing all forms of political dissent, the NSL did not only successfully squelch the Anti-ELAB Movement, but it has also wreaked havoc on Hong Kong's civil society by persecuting activists, censoring media outlets, and intensifying state surveillance to promote a sense of diffused fear and anxiety (Amnesty International 2020, C. Li 2021). Amidst this political and cultural climate, protest zines remain part of the 'affective cultural commons of the pro-democracy movement' (Lowe 2021, p. 16). As Lowe argues, protest art should be conceptualized as 'not merely cultural artifacts or memorabilia but affective technologies of political activism that

circumvent censorship and surveillance in the public sphere' (2021, p. 10). By analyzing how protest zines highlighted the importance of communal and self-care during the Anti-ELAB Movement, we seek to preserve the anti-authoritarian praxis of Hong Kong zinesters and their audiences in building 'a space in opposition to dominant norms, a space where transformational political work can begin' (Cohen 1997, p. 438).

Primary analysis

Given our interest in examining the ways in which protest zines function as a technology of care amidst state violence, we analyzed 17 out of the 36 Anti-ELAB protest zines in Zine COOP's exhibition catalog. We selected these texts because they were some of the most circulated zines during the movement that also focus on communal- and self-care, kinship, and emotions. In addition to the composition and genre of the texts and images, we considered the rhetorical ecology in which the zines were situated, paying attention to the various ways in which the zines may impact or move their audiences. Our attempts to meticulously track and analyze the circulation and audiencing of these zines were unfortunately impeded by the NSL and ongoing suppression of activists in Hong Kong. Many platforms and media outlets that had once circulated protest zines are now either defunct or are forced to self-censor. While it may no longer be possible to trace a complete picture of how these zines were circulated and received during the Anti-ELAB Movement, the zines themselves nevertheless articulate a transformational politic that, in Cathy Cohen's words, 'seeks to change values, definitions, and laws that make these institutions and relationships oppressive' (1997, p. 445).

As Hongkongers, we mobilized our epistemic privilege and insider knowledge in our analysis. While we cannot make claims on how the zines impact all their readers, we examined the ways in which they move us affectively, and interpret their rhetorical impact during the movement. In what follows, we illustrate how Hong Kong protest zines functioned as mutual aid and communal care among frontline protesters, zinesters, and movement supporters. They allowed zinesters and their readers to tend to each other's relational and emotional needs during moments of political ruptures. We analyze how protest zines opened up discursive and affective spaces for individuals to be in affective community with other movement supporters and transform personal feelings and relations into a site of resistance.

Emotional habitus for bad feelings

Imposed first by the British colonial government, the catchphrase 'Prosperity and Stability' (繁榮穩定) has been the hallmark of Hong Kong's success story

since the British colonial era. After the handover of Hong Kong to China in 1997, it has since been adopted as the slogan of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region government in its bid for legitimacy through socioeconomic appeals (Wong 2022). While nationalist state narratives encouraged Hongkongers to be happy and content, grassroots activists and movement supporters expressed their anger and dissatisfaction with the authoritarian government through protests and rallies, and hopeless resignation, fear, and anxiety in private laments. We posit that in the Anti-ELAB Movement, protesters and movement supporters experienced two kinds of taboo bad feelings, which were repeatedly acknowledged in protest zines. By bringing these taboo feelings to the forefront, these zines remind movement supporters that they are not alone in experiencing these emotions, thus facilitating a sense of affective solidarity and care amongst them.

The first kind of bad feelings are *activating* emotions and affective states – such as outrage and discontent – that fuel grassroots mobilization and social movements (Lyman 2004, Eyerman 2005). Because of their mobilization potential, these feelings are deemed dangerous and threatening to the authoritarian state. Anger and contempt inspire collective actions against the perceived shared enemy, prompting protesters to seek justice and retribution or revenge (Smith and Lazarus 1990, Becker *et al.* 2011). During the Anti-ELAB Movement, anger was a pervasive public emotion triggered by unrelenting police and state violence. The protest slogan shifted over time from 'Hongkongers, add oil (加油),' to 'Hongkongers, resist (反抗),' and finally, after months of prolonged forceful suppression from the state, to 'Hongkongers, revenge (報仇).' As the evolution of protest slogans demonstrates, outrage and discontent against the state accumulates and escalates, prompting more radical political actions and solidarity among movement supporters. The Chinese and Hong Kong governments repeatedly attempted to contain and suppress such emotions by characterizing protesters as rioters whose irrational passion override the 'long-term interests' and stability of the Hong Kong society (The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region 2020, para. 2).

The second kind of bad feelings are the ones that are *debilitating*. They comprise of immobilizing emotions, such as disappointment, fear, and depression, that run contrary to the prosperous imagery the state portrays. At the same time, these affective states threaten to hamper the momentum protest movements hope to maintain. Like *activating* bad feelings, debilitating emotions punctured the 'promise of happiness' constructed by the state as they demonstrated a politics of refusal (Ahmed 2010b, p. 30). As Ahmed (2010b) argues, 'to see happily is not to see violence, asymmetry, or force' (p. 132). Happiness, in other words, requires conformity, complacency, and compliance. When movement supporters experienced and expressed despair, depression, and anxiety amidst ongoing state violence and

authoritarianism, they made clear that they no longer wanted to abide by the 'cruel optimism' (Berlant 2011) instilled by the state. Rather, they sought alternative ways of governance and relating beyond the existing system.

While debilitating bad feelings challenge the state's constructed narrative on happiness and contentment, it is not always welcome in social movements. Deborah Gould argues that movements produce and also prohibit specific 'feeling states' through their 'emotional pedagogy,' which often teaches activists that they are allowed to feel rage and hope, but not despair and depression (2019, p. 103). In her study of ACT UP, she (2019) finds that because 'there was no collective space created for that bad feeling' (p. 103) activists who experienced despair chose to leave the movement, as they had become what Ahmed (2010b) calls 'affect aliens' who 'convert[ed] good feelings into bad' (p. 49). In other words, when despair and depression are constructed as unacceptable emotions for movement supporters because they do not actively propel collective action, those who experience these bad feelings might feel alienated or trapped by their 'bad' emotions.

Like bad feelings that are activating, despair and depression were extremely salient in the Anti-ELAB Movement. Facing down the powerful Chinese state, protesters understood that the grassroots movement was unlikely to overturn the status quo. As such, many movement supporters admitted to feeling hopeless, heartbroken, frustrated, and helpless (Tufekci 2019, L. Kuo and Obordo 2020). For peaceful movement supporters and frontline protesters alike, the feeling of helplessness often tumbled into a deep sense of guilt and shame for not contributing more to the movement (Wong 2021, *Revolution of our times* 2022). Scholars have found that a significant number of movement supporters – including those who did not participate in a lot of protest activities – suffered from depression, anxiety, and traumatic stress (A. W. Y. Li *et al*. 2021). Activists, however, did not usually seek professional help because of stigma against mental illness, lack of access to resources, and out of fear that healthcare providers would report their protest activities to the police (Ehrenkranz 2019, Cheung 2022). By articulating both *activating* and *debilitating* bad feelings through narratives, testimonies, and drawings, protest zines render them no longer alienizing and taboo, but as collective emotions that deserve communal care.

In the zine titled *June 9 Morning*, Laila, the artist, focuses on narrating debilitating bad feelings from learning about the June 9th protest, and how these emotions are combated by the love for Hong Kong, a love that is not sanctioned by the state. The zine begins as a diary entry, told from the first-person perspective of Laila, who experienced immense anxiety and grief from reading about the June 9th protest, wherein an estimated 1 million people took to the streets to demonstrate against the extradition bill. With its diary-style, intimate tone, the zine carries strong affective

charges that would resonate with readers who are similarly in the throes of anxiety, helplessness, insecurity, and grief. By showing us her upturned palms in a POV shot (Figure 1), Laila makes the readers feel involved in the narrative, as if the readers are seeing through the narrator's eyes. On the page, the words depicting these bad feelings – 'emotions of worrying, grief, angst' (Ho 2019, p. 4) – are written over the narrator's sweaty palms, thus visually integrating the narrator's bodily sensations with the named emotions. Readers can readily feel a sense of intimacy with the artist's vulnerability, and an embodied community is inscribed as writer and reader share affects of grief and anxiety, which are conventionally labelled as unacceptable emotions for a social movement.

The narrator of the zine also talks about being moved to tears by the sheer beauty of an online article, 'Love Hong Kong,' which is a rumination of Hong Kongers' complex love for the city they call home – a place where democracy and freedom are steadily being eroded. Several extreme close-ups of Laila's eyes shedding a tear are overlaid with words from the article about Hong Kongers' love for freedom and democracy: 'To love in Hong Kong, to express our love for Hong Kong … "Freedom and democracy." I'm afraid I can no longer love' (qtd. in Ho 2019, p. 5, translations ours). This frame brings the narrator's emotions into sharp focus. By intentionally appealing to specific body parts, namely through successive frames showing extreme

Figure 1. Laila Ho, *June 9 Morning*, p. 4. Used with permission.

close-ups of the narrator's eyes watering and shedding tears, and her raising a hand to wipe the tears away (Figure 2), Laila stimulates the readers' bodily senses in the hope that readers will feel a visceral tug towards various affective positions, in particular those of 'the melancholics' (Ahmed 2010b, p. 141); Hong Kongers who continue to mourn the loss of their civil liberties and autonomy, resemble those who Ahmed calls the *melancholics* – 'affect aliens in how they love: their love becomes a failure to get over loss, which keeps them facing the wrong way' (Ahmed 2010b, p. 141). To the Chinese and Hong Kong governments, these melancholics are oriented towards that which must be disavowed, thus they must be redirected, or turned around by leveraging broadly defined offences of 'secession,' 'subversion,' 'terrorism' and 'collusion with foreign forces' under the national security law.

Laila also reflexively explores zine creation as a form of agency. In her zine, she poignantly states that, 'I couldn't do anything, just staring at my own hands' (qtd. in Ho 2019, p. 4, translations ours). At the same time, however, she claims her agency over her experience by crafting the zine, which suggests that the aesthetic possibilities of zine creation were shaped by a desire to assuage or act on the aforementioned feelings of helplessness and ineptitude. The physical acts that making a zine entails, of writing, drawing, cutting, and pasting provide physical engagement with storytelling that connects with 'the embodied sensation of making sense, the lived experience of our learning selves that make the thing we call knowledge'

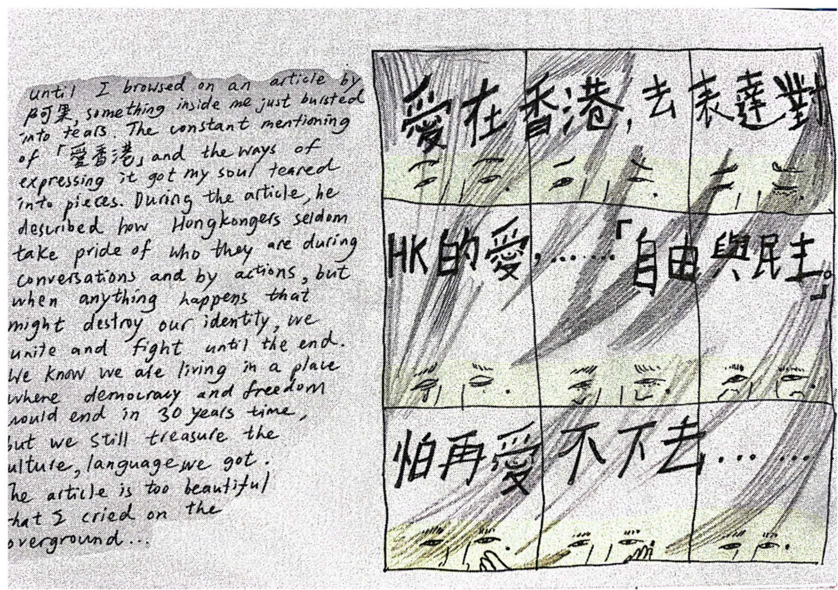

Figure 2. Laila Ho, *June 9 Morning*, p. 5. Used with permission.

(Ellsworth 2005, p. 1). Through crafting and distributing the zine, Laila shows that acknowledging and connecting with our lived, embodied experience of bad feelings can facilitate creative expressions that are grounded in our attunement to our affective states. The materiality of the zine, thus, legitimizes debilitating bad feelings, making available an alternative 'emotional habitus' (D. B. Gould 2009, p. 35) for movement supporters who come across this zine. By doing so, bad feelings become shared emotions that are to be acknowledged, and attended to in community, rather than as taboos that must be cast out.

Solitude is widely considered a tabooed bad feeling – an undesirable barrier to the solidarity necessary for both happiness and political participation. Sociological theory has long viewed solitude as a symptom of *anomie* – an expression of both personal and social disorganization (Wirth 1938). While the interactive features of social media platforms have led to the creation of horizontal communication networks, allowing users to spread information and resources through personal means, to get in touch with like-minded individuals, and even to provide and distribute care, given the diffused and decentralized character of the protests, participants still experienced solitude despite being in solidarity. The zine entitled *Another New Day* (Wong 2020) articulates and accommodates the isolating solitariness felt by individual protesters despite an overwhelming outpouring of solidarity, essentially obfuscating the presumed opposition between solidarity and solitude. Adopting a diary-like style similar to *June 9 Morning*, *Another New Day* is a zine that consists of no dialogue, only black and white images depicting a single day as experienced by a young protester and the myriad of debilitating emotions – a mixture of anxiety, fear, guilt, and solitude – that the protester went through during the political turmoil. In the zine, there are two spreads filled with hand-drawn messaging bubbles, twitter posts, and other social media posts in different languages, all showing people's real-time reactions to the unfolding conflict between the heavily armoured anti-riot police and young protesters (Figure 3). These spreads are a stark contrast to the rest of the zine, which consists of mostly spare drawings and lots of blank spaces, foregrounding the contiguity of solidarity and solitude when the protagonist participates in collective actions among other masked, nameless activists (Figure 4). While the lack of dialogue and abundance of blank spaces in the zine indicates that the protagonist is alone, they are never on their own in the movement because of the constant stream of messages and social media posts from other protesters checking in with one another. Facilitated by technology, protesters within this leaderless, decentralized movement were able to self-organize and demonstrate their support for the movement in a collective manner, displaying a tremendous level of solidarity unseen in previous protests. The zine captures the oscillating states of depression, loneliness, and collective action

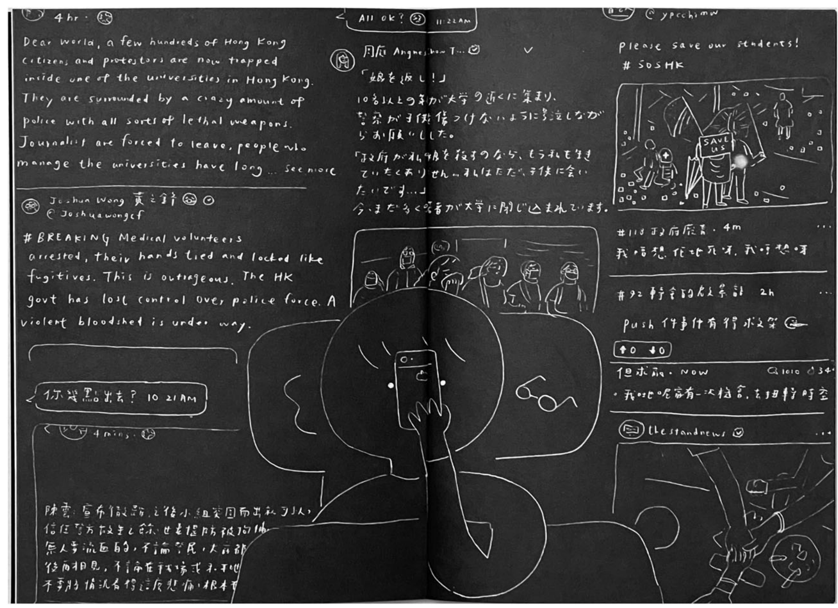

Figure 3. Meiyin Wong, *Another New Day*. Used with permission.

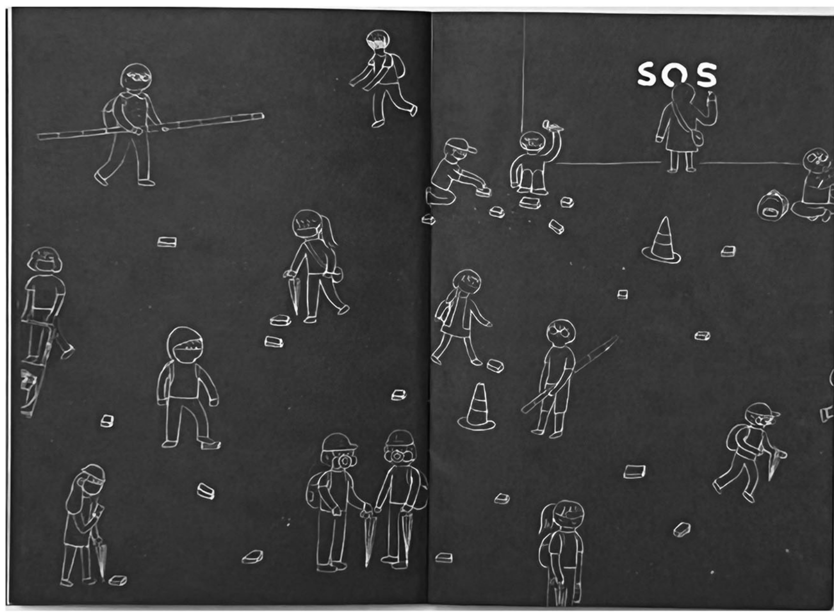

Figure 4. Meiyin Wong, *Another New Day*. Used with permission.

that protesters commonly faced. It depicts the difficult emotional terrain protesters were experiencing and facilitates a sense of affective community among frontline protesters who, for safety reasons, could not reveal their identity to one another.

The chaos of the political crisis and people's psyches is recreated in the visual components of the zine. Some of the words of the social media posts or messaging bubbles crowd in on or overlap with the illustration, and the margin cuts off some of the words as well, offering a visual representation of the tumultuous situation, as well as the feelings of being overwhelmed and assailed by a cacophony of different voices. The materiality of the zine itself is also brought to attention; the limits of the page – an ineluctable part of the printed matter – become an aesthetic element out of which the artist gives form to the protagonist's conflicted feelings of distress and self-reproach over running to safety from the police and abandoning their fellow protesters. Structurally, the story begins and ends in much of the same way, with the protagonist scrolling through social media posts and messages; the circular structure of the story reinforces the deep sense of exhaustion and Sisyphean futility felt by some protesters during the protracted movement. Reading the zine offers more than a description of the violent street clashes and the protester's on-the-ground experience: it invites the reader to empathize or resonate with the debilitating bad feelings that young protesters were faced with, such as guilt, dejection, and solitude, without reducing them to the negative underside of solidarities, belonging, and society.

Self and community care as resistance

Besides creating an alternative emotional habitus for frontline protesters and movement supporters to confront and articulate both activating and debilitating bad feelings as shared emotions, protest zines play a pivotal role in the politics of the personal by attending to protesters' and movement supporters' physical, emotional, and relational wellbeing. During the Anti-ELAB Movement, the conduct of the Hong Kong Police Force was a subject of immense controversy. Allegations against the police included excessive use of force, force against non-specific targets, and arrest without warrant. For Hong Kong protesters, self-care was about survival rather than about any consumerist concept of self-improvement or reward – a distinction that was especially pertinent to these young people attempting to survive arbitrary and violent arrests carried out by a regime that had been flippant and negligent towards the preservation of their lives. This emphasis on self-care and survival is aligned with the feminist maxim that the personal is the political, suggesting the potential

for self and community care to effect political change at larger scales (Lorde 2017).

Several zines that came out of the Anti-ELAB Movement focus on helping protesters and movement supporters maintain their physical and mental health. One of these examples is *If you are in a bad mood* by Cherry Chan, a Hong Kong yoga instructor living in Taiwan. The zine is a hand drawn self-care guide filled with mental health ideas and exercises, such as hugging, taking deep breaths, stretching, etc., to help manage negative emotions. Using both drawings and words, the artist advocates letting negative emotions flow and run their course, instead of suppressing or purging them (Chan 2019, p. 7). At the back of the zine is a blank, lined page for note taking, which elicits a kind of bodily engagement akin to having a specific experience of corresponding with someone. Taking cues from Carol Hanisch's (2000) now-famous essay 'The Personal Is Political,' scribbling on the back of the zine would not be just a form of self-therapy, but a politically significant act: by offering a space for the reader to inscribe upon it, the zine invites the stretching of intimate spaces, interactions and practices to engender relations of care between the zine creator and the reader that traverse interpersonal, institutional, and even national realms.

Similarly, by practicing the mental health tips and exercises as shown in Cherry Chan's zine, in other words, through a practice of radical self-love, the reader is connected to the community of resistance. Black feminist Audre Lorde argues that 'caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare' (2017, p. 130). Echoing Lorde, in the lyrics of the song 'Faith (最後的信仰)' written by Albert Leung and reprinted in Venus Lo's protest zine *Take Care of Your Little Soul* (照顧你的小心靈): 'As long as we live, we need to drink water even just to keep crying (只需要 死不去 流淚都必須喝水)' (qtd. in Lo 2019, pp. 29-30, translation ours), seemingly inconsequential everyday acts, such as drinking water for sustenance and being well, take on political significance in situations of injustice. Feminist critiques have long challenged the idea that politics must necessarily relate to political institutions of the state and to public interactions by showing how patriarchy plays out often covertly and in private (e.g. Millett 1970, McRobbie 1994).The mundane lyrics, alongside illustrations showing frontline protesters equipped with helmets, masks and goggles, highlight the role of everyday life in relation to power and ask us to look beyond the obvious moments of democratic political engagement, whether activism in the streets or on the web, to pay attention to the quiet politics of the everyday, where everyday decision making by individuals and communities, such as promoting and practicing self-care, can gradually transform dominant hegemonic norms and practices.

Besides caring for movement supporters' physical and emotional well-being, protest zines also provided concrete support to frontline protesters

who might have been caught in violent clashes with the police. Presented in a non-threatening, readable and warm manner through cartoon drawings and colloquial Cantonese writing, the zine *Protect yourself and Write down your Sleepwalking Experience: Friendly Tips for those Arrested* (保護自己 盡早記低夢遊經過: 給被捕者的溫馨提示) (Yu 2019a) offers legal advice for protesters who might face arrest. The word 'sleepwalking' in the title is a euphemism for participating in protests, used to circumvent government surveillance. In the face of widespread censorship and repression of dissent, movement supporters deploy ambiguous and imaginative language, such as *dreaming*, *sleepwalking*, and *picnics* as metaphors for attending demonstrations and protests. By featuring the indirect term in the title – one that is conducive to building oppositional awareness – the zine invokes a strong sense of solidarity with the protesters. Also presented in an accessible and cheery visual manner, featuring vibrant drawings and sparse texts, *Save Hong Kong Ourselves, Self-Help First-Aid* (自己香港自己救, 自己受傷自己救) (Yu 2019b) is a compilation of grassroots tips and resources on keeping oneself safe during protests: such as making tear gas remedy using baking soda, washing out pepper spray with baby shampoo, and covering wounds with sanitary pads. The zine's lively aesthetics convey a clear sense of care and warmth, as does the message throughout to keep oneself safe. Both of these zines propose the importance of activating agency and self-sufficiency while building relations of care among protesters and movement supporters through both self- and collective practices. Operating either physically or virtually as politicized community spaces, these self-care zines have been key sites for the exchange of mutual aid, enabled by the production, circulation, and reading of the zines.

Voluntary kinship and nuclear family as site of resistance

In addition to opening up the space for movement supporters to provide mutual care and to be in affective community with each other, protest zines also engage in consciousness-raising that 'situate the personal within the political in ways that grappled with their reciprocity, and with the inevitable complicities of anyone entangled in these networks' (Hsu 2022, p. 41). In this section, we examine how zines prompt the audience to challenge parallel authoritarianism in the public and private spheres by amplifying voluntary kinship outside of legal and blood ties, and by transforming the familiar biological nuclear family structure into a political site of resistance. Examining the relationship between youth protesters and their parents, Hong Kong scholars have previously noted that protesters were engaging in 'parallel resistance' (Tsang and Wilkinson 2022, p. 312) that traverses both the public and domestic spheres. Since most nuclear families in Hong Kong expect children to always be obedient and subservient to their parents,

when youth activists participated in the protest movement against their parents' wishes, they were advocating for self-determination for themselves and for Hong Kong. Protest zines contribute to the existing community of care in the movement by reinventing the meaning of the family and its relationship to the state, proffering an alternative political vision that amplifies the resistive potential of communal care and kinship in and outside of the nuclear family structure.

The family has long been yoked to the nation-state through nationalist narratives and metaphors (Hayden 2003, Lakoff and Johnson 2003, Yam 2019). In the Chinese context, filial piety to one's parents and harmony in the nuclear family are rhetorically linked to patriotism and loyalty to the nation-state (Pan *et al.* 2001, Guo 2003). In the construction of the nation-family metaphor, the paternalistic state is constructed as an authoritative parental figure who can lead an obedient citizenry into stability and prosperity. At the beginning of the Anti-ELAB Movement, Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam used a familial metaphor to describe the protesters and her relationship to them. Visibly close to tears, Lam remarked that if she were to indulge her wayward son in his bad behaviours, in the long run, her son would suffer the consequences and would blame her for not disciplining him sooner (South China Morning Post 2019). Through this mother-son metaphor, Lam infantilized protesters as disobedient children, and justified the heavy deployment of police force and other means of suppression as a form of motherly love towards the citizenry (Guo 2021). As Ahmed (2010a) points out, the family is often constructed as a 'happy object' that requires members to conform to and reproduce its existing form (p. 45). A paternalistic state yields similar affective disciplinary power towards its citizenry, demanding how they ought to feel about the government and those in power. In Lam's metaphor and in other governmental portrayals of protesters, dissenters were represented as willfull children who did not know what was best for them. They, hence, must be guided by authoritarian figures.

In a poignant critique of Lam's familial metaphor, a zinester painted a full-body standing portrait of Lam in simple lines – her torso surrounded by a dark ink blot, and her expressionless eyes peeking right above her thin-rimmed glasses (4res 2020). On the top left corner were five bright yellow stars and two short lines that mimic a movie poster: 'The Mother of Hong Kong Movingly Appears.' Behind Lam's portrait are two large Chinese characters written in brush calligraphy: '臨奠' (4res 2020, p. 15). While the two characters respectively sound and look like Lam's name, they refer to the offering one gives to a dead person. To the right of the frame are more formal characters that signal the end of one's life: '壽終正寢—送終' (4res 2020, p. 15). Under the zinester's hand, rather than a life-giving mother, Lam is satirized as a figure of death – as someone who brings death to Hong Kong, and/or as someone whom protesters wish would die. The zinester also satirizes the

police force through a similar portrayal and word play. While the Chief Executive is a mother who brings death, the police force is a brother not to the citizenry, but to gang members who harass protesters. By mocking the government's familial metaphors, the zinester prompts readers to interrogate how the family can be weaponized to justify state violence. In addition to rupturing the familial metaphors deployed by the state, protest zines also uplift voluntary non-biological kin ties that defy relationship models sanctioned by the state. Voluntary kinship and communal care was a key tenet in the Anti-ELAB Movement. To evade censorship, movement supporters deployed parental metaphors to describe the care they provided to frontline protesters. For instance, volunteers who offered free rides to frontline protesters were euphemistically called 'parents,' and the action likened to 'parents picking up their kids after school.' Movement supporters who sponsor youth protesters were called 'mom' and 'dad,' taking the place of the youth's biological parents who had disowned them. Such strategic appeals to parenthood by movement supporters challenge the paternalistic, dominant political order while promoting an alternative set of values based on gestures of care and connective actions.

In the mostly text-based zine *Love in a Time of Revolution* (Siaw 2020), a group of zinesters transform news stories and anonymous Facebook posts written by frontline protesters into third-person narratives. Deeply descriptive of the police violence they faced while clashing with anti-riot police, the protagonist of each narrative articulates the voluntary kin ties (Nelson 2013) they have created that are not bound by the state, or by the nuclear family model that prioritizes only the interests of those you are biologically related to. In a story titled 'Frontline Sweethearts in the Smoke,' protagonists Yan and Wah were a couple who protested together. Narrating their story and the stories of other couples like them, the zinester Kwan Ling Mok writes, 'In Hong Kong, a couple doesn't ask each other, "If your mother and I both fell into the water, who would you save?" They ask, "If I'm being taken away by the police, would you rescue me?" … As direct experience can attest, both Wah and Yan are the kind who would answer, "I'd save you"' (Mok 2020, p. 25). This vignette epitomizes the supposed mutual exclusivity between one's love towards one's biological nuclear family, and one's dedication to one's romantic partner. The narratives collected in this zine, however, demonstrate that the love and care protesters demonstrate for one another through voluntary kinship is much more expansive and mutually reciprocal than the state-sanctioned biological nuclear family model. Voluntary kinship that transcends legal and blood ties 'implies a mutuality of selection' (Braithwaite *et al.* 2010, p. 390), a politic of care that undermines asymmetrical power relations in both private and public spheres.

Throughout the narratives in *Love in a Time of Revolution,* the zinesters posit that love is not bound by biological ties but is rather cultivated and

enacted in moments of shared conviction and risks. On the frontline, Wah and Yan did not only care for and rescue each other from police arrests, but they extended their love to strangers. Wah recounts that he once tried to save a fellow protester who was surrounded by police: 'The only part of him I could touch with an umbrella was his hand. I remember that strength. I grabbed on tight and didn't give up. Who would have thought that he would let go? He said he couldn't be saved and told us to go' (Mok 2020, pp. 25-26). The zinester adds, 'At that moment, Wah felt, someone had paid ten years in his place. They didn't know each other, but their fates were tied' (Mok 2020, p. 26). Later, Yan describes seeing a volunteer first-aid worker who pleaded incessantly with the police to let him through the barricade to treat civilians who had been brutally beaten by the force: 'His voice kept breaking as he said, "I'll give you my gear" and "you can charge me with rioting afterwards" … I was really moved. The first-aid worker and the people inside obviously didn't know each other. Why was he so willing to sacrifice himself for them?' (Mok 2020, p. 26).

Through Yan and Wah's experience, Mok articulates the deep kinship frontline protesters felt for one another, and the extent to which they strived to keep each other safe. The voluntary kinship protesters developed among each other was deemed taboo or even criminal by the state because its diffused and reciprocal nature was useful in propelling the movement forward. The leaderless and non-hierarchical arrangement of voluntary kin also directly threatens the legitimacy of an authoritarian top-down government. By highlighting the kinship and love protesters had for one another despite the lack of a biological connection, the zinester offers voluntary kinship as simultaneously a mode of anti-authoritarian resistance, and as a healing salve protesters share among each other.

Love in a Time of Revolution illustrates more than one kind of voluntary kin and demonstrates how they connect to facilitate a mutual care network that refutes the state sanctioned model of family and relationship. In 'The Frontline Brother and the Backup Brother Walking Hand in Hand in the Evening Mists,' Wing Yan Ng narrates the story of Bo and Leung – a gay couple who were, respectively, a frontline first-aid volunteer, and a peaceful protester who served as backup support for frontliners. Ng describes how Bo learned to provide first-aid without putting himself in grave danger because he did not want to worry Leung (Ng 2020). While he never stopped worrying, Leung understood the kinship Bo felt towards his fellow frontline protesters and out of his love for Bo, he would not 'stop the one he loved' (Ng 2020, p. 33). Ng poignantly describes their relationship: 'The Backup Brother became the Frontline Brother's strongest support' (2020, p. 33). Like the story of Yan and Wah, Ng connects romantic kinship with the revolutionary love protesters had for each other, and for the anti-authoritarian cause they were struggling for.

Bo and Leung's story highlights voluntary kinship beyond heteronormative romantic relationships, the only relationship model that is sanctioned by the Chinese and Hong Kong governments. Bo and Leung, in other words, were portrayed as resisting intersecting forces of authoritarianism that render their bodies and relationship – as fellow protesters, and as gay lovers – taboo. During the climax of the story, Bo learned that Leung was caught up at the Chinese University of Hong Kong campus during a particularly brutal police siege. After he found Leung, 'ignoring the painful crick in his neck, [Bo] leaned full length against him. Looking at Leung, Bo very nearly kissed him. But his internalized taboos made him aware of the media, visible from the corner of his eye … The kiss that existed only in imagination became tightly clasped hands' (Ng 2020, p. 34). The two of them then walked hand in hand along the barricaded highway until they were completely exhausted. Shortly after, Leung decided to stop worrying about what his biological family would think of his relationship and brought Bo home for dinner. In this narrative, Bo and Leung's resistance against the authoritarian government is intimately connected to their struggle against anti-gay stigma in public and private contexts. At the end, Ng poignantly prompts the audience to consider the expansiveness of love that transcends state-sanctioned boundaries that dictate whom and how one must relate to others:

> Someone once said revolution is for a more beautiful love. Leung feels that in order to make love beautiful, he must move forward in a better direction with the man he loves. In that direction, there is no compromise, and no avoiding the heavy stuff to make things easier.
>
> That's true of love, and also Hong Kong. (2020, p. 37)

The voluntary kinship articulated in *Love in a Time of Revolution* exemplifies a queer feminist ethic of mutual care, and of creating grassroots care networks when the current systems have repeatedly failed. As Ahmed pens, 'we have to create our own support systems, queer handles – how we hold on, how life can go on – when we are shattered, because we are shattered' (2019, p. 219). By collecting, editing, and circulating these taboo kin ties and fleeting moments of love in action in a zine, the creators of *Love in a Time of Revolution* produced a material record of how protesters – especially those who were multiply marginalized – deployed mutual care as a tactic of resistance and survival. As 'an art of the weak' (de Certeau 2011, p. 37), the tactics invented by protesters and their experiences have been rapidly and systematically suppressed and erased by the state under the National Security Law. Able to bypass state censorship and gatekeeping by dominant institutions, zines play a key role in documenting how protesters had engaged in different care relationships to make life more livable.

For many youth protesters who faced suppression from *both* the state government and their elders and parents at home, the inextricable connection between the authoritarian state and the nuclear family was deeply felt and incredibly painful. While some protesters chose to sever ties with their nuclear family and rely on their voluntary kin, others navigated the tenuous relationship with their politically opposing loved ones (Law 2019, Au 2021) Protest zines attend to this struggle in a few ways. While some – like Inksundae's *Family Relationship Rescue* (2020) – offers loving advice on how to open up dialogues with one's family members, others depict firsthand experiences from protesters who have navigated the effect their activism has had on their nuclear family ties. By doing so, these zines provide solace to readers who have become 'affect aliens' for rupturing the dual myth of the happy family and harmonious nation-state (Ahmed 2010b, p. 49).

In *Me and My Parents Go Protesting* (J. Li and Chan 2019), zinesters transform an anonymously submitted familial protest story into a comic that depicts how the struggle for democracy and self-determination extends into nuclear family relations. In the comic, the protagonist – a young movement supporter – navigates her at times contentious relationship with her nuclear family members, whilst participating in the ever-escalating protests from May to July 2019. Each page contains a single frame that depicts the protagonist attending the protests, running away from tear gas while attempting to help other protesters, and engaging in conflicts and resolutions with her parents and siblings. In a particularly salient moment, the protagonist is having dinner with her parents after watching the Chief Executive describe protesters as 'rioters' who need to be disciplined. Around the dining table, the father, with his arms crossed, remarks that he saw protesters with metal rods on TV, so they must be rioters. The protagonist, her mouth opened wide and brows raised, vehemently disputed her father's account. The next few frames show the mother telling the protagonist to stop criticizing and calling her father out, implying that filial affection and obedience is more important than one's political conviction. The protagonist stuns her mother by sharing that she herself had been in that exact protest and was tear gassed despite being far from the frontline. Her protest experiences are juxtaposed with frames that depict ongoing and escalating police violence. The readers can use their own imagination to fill in the conversations the protagonist is having with her parents after her protest experiences.

Close to the end, the zine depicts the parents wearing Black – a colour that symbolizes support for the movement – and becoming more supportive and well-versed in the protesters' demands, even explaining why they had been attending marches to their unsympathetic son (the protagonist's brother) in Canada. The last few frames show the parents attending protest marches on their own, wearing black T-shirts and white ribbons gifted by the protagonist

for Father's Day. During the monumental 2 million-people march, the zine depicts the parents' faces amidst a sea of fellow movement supporters. While *Me and My Parent Go Protesting* represents only one activist's familial turmoil and never offers any concrete advice on how to facilitate reconciliation, it invites the audience to see familial relationships as a site for transformational politics that challenge the hierarchy in both political and private spheres. Instead of insisting the protagonist obey traditional state-sanctioned power structures, the end of the zine offers a hopeful vision of reconciliation and collaboration between the protagonist and her parents, all of them in solidarity with each other, and with other movement supporters who demand political autonomy for Hongkongers.

In another zine that also depicts nuclear familial relationship as a site of political resistance, the zinester Jeffrey Yeung writes from his perspective as a father. In *In the Million People March, My Daughter Asked Me …* , Yeung structures the zine as an extended Q&A between him and his young daughter. Some pages begin with a benign question raised by his daughter: 'Daddy, when will we finish walking? Why are we putting all the flowers on the road? Is the government still not listening to us?' (Yeung 2019, pp. 6, 7, 11). In response to these questions, Yeung articulates his love for his daughter alongside his revolutionary love for Hong Kong. At the beginning of the zine, he explains that he creates this zine in solidarity with other parents who are 'also fighting for their children's future, reaching out to care, to embrace, to encourage others and add strength to Hong Kong … No matter how far we go in the protests, may our hearts always be rooted in love for the people and for this land' (2019, p. 4). Similar to *Love in a Time of Revolution,* which connects romantic love and voluntary kinship with protesters' political conviction, Yeung's zine politicizes parental love – or, to put differently, Yeung articulates how parental love is always already connected to the political struggle for liberation.

Revolutionary love and parental love, however, can be in conflict with one another. In response to his daughter wondering when they could go home from the crowded and exhausting march, Yeung writes, 'Daddy must apologise to you that your Sunday wasn't more fun and comfortable … I couldn't even soothe and settle you. I was so mad at myself, yet in a time like this, what can I do to protect my family and stand for our precious rights and freedoms?' (2019, p. 9). Yeung resolves the conflict between his love for Hong Kong's democratic future and his care for his children by articulating the political nature of family building: as reproductive justice advocates point out, an environment that renders it unhealthy and unsustainable to raise children is a form of injustice (Ross and Solinger 2017). Across the span of four whole pages, Yeung severs a black-and-white image of his sleeping children with eight large stark black fonts that read '暴力制度斷送未來' (Structural violence is killing our future)

Figure 5. (a) and (b). Jeffrey Yeung, *In the Million People March, My Daughter Asked Me …* , pp. 21-24. Used with permission.

(2019, pp. 21-24) (Figure 5). This jarring visual juxtaposition reminds readers that state violence directly threatens one's ability to care for one's beloved children. An oppressive government, Yeung reminds his readers, is a form of reproductive injustice that threatens peoples' right

to raise their children in a safe and sustainable environment (Ross and Solinger 2017). By doing so, Yeung articulates a transformational politic that connects the political and the domestic.

Taken together, the protest zines analyzed in this section encourage readers to engage in 'parallel resistance' in the public and private spheres by connecting intimate relationships – including the seemingly unpolitical kin ties in a nuclear family – with political struggles. They directly address the tension protesters and movement supporters experience in their daily relationships, without vilifying those who do not abide by the imaginary of the 'happy family' at both the state and individual levels.

Conclusion

While the Anti-ELAB Movement and Hong Kong's civil society have both been decimated by the draconian NSL, protest zines serve as a record of the care the movement supporters extended to each other at the height of political turmoil. As grassroots cultural artefacts, zines help provide support, healing, and acknowledgement to movement supporters and protesters when the state actively suppress them with violence. Making zines, reading them, swapping and collecting them are all part of distributing care through and with the medium of the zine. Given intense political suppression, many protest zinesters have since either emigrated or stopped producing political artwork. However, as enduring affective objects that continue to circulate through transnational exhibitions and digital networks, Hong Kong protest zines have become both a memorabilia and reminder of the importance of communal care and solidarity.

By analyzing the effects of Hong Kong protest zines, we hope to not only uplift grassroots tactics and forms of care that are under suppression, but also to invite other scholars to examine and amplify praxis invented by marginalized communities that render lives more livable under oppressive conditions. Cultural studies researchers can contribute to anti-authoritarian struggles by centring the voices from the margins, highlighting how oppressed groups deploy cultural practices and political imaginaries for a more democratic future.

Note

1. While the movement was initially triggered by the Extradition Bill that would allow Hong Kong's Chief Executive to extradite anyone to mainland China without due legal processes, it turned into a broader call for democracy and police accountability.

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