TAKING JUSTICE INTO THEIR OWN HANDS: 'NETILANTISM' IN HONG KONG

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THE 2019 HONG KONG protests (see Chapter 2 'Hong Kong's Reckoning', pp.51–67 and Chapter 8 'Hong Kong and the Tiananmen Playbook', pp.223–235) have been called protests with 'no main stage' 無大台. Most of the activities have been organised via brief messages distributed through digital technologies. While digital technologies such as WhatsApp and Telegram, as well as online forums such as HK Golden 高登, were also used in the 2014 Umbrella Movement, there was still a centralised core group who made decisions. However, the 2019 protests were famously 'leaderless'; decisions on actions and gatherings, and even the writing of the lyrics to the newly composed anthem, 'Glory to Hong Kong' 願榮光歸香港, were made collectively using digital technology. Anyone could organise an event and disseminate news through apps or online forums. This made the 2019 movement more flexible and creative compared with its predecessor; it could 'be water'. It also made possible simultaneous protests in all of Hong Kong's eighteen regions and enabled different types of protests, including flash mobs at shopping malls singing 'Glory to Hong Kong' 願榮光歸香港.[1]

'Glory to Hong Kong' graffiti
Source: Studio Incendo, Flickr

Protesters and their sympathisers also used digital technologies to identify 'black police' 黑警 — police who had allegedly facilitated attacks on protesters by criminal triads or who used excessive force. They also used digital technologies to identify those who had been arrested, and to inform family and friends.

Internet vigilantism aimed at exposing the personal details of police and their supporters falls under a kind of doxing known in Chinese as 人肉搜索 or 人肉搜查 'human flesh searching' or 起底 'digging through to the bottom layers'. The term first appeared on the mainland in early 2000 and has become common in the greater China region (that is, the PRC, Hong Kong, and Taiwan). Since

2010, doxing has become a common phenomenon throughout the world. It is a type of collective online action aimed at shaming and punishing criminals or deviants in order to reinstate legal or moral justice.

In our 2016 paper on the subject, Ryan Poon and I used the term 'internet vigilantism' (or 'netilantism') to refer to online attempts to identify crime (for example, through anticorruption activities in China), to investigate crime or deviant behaviour (for example, cases of police brutality in Hong Kong), and/or to punish criminals (for example, cyberbullies and online child predators) through public naming and shaming.[2] We looked into Hong Kong students who participated in netilantism and found

that they tended to have higher self-confidence than others and believed they could contribute to change in the world. They also believed that the Hong Kong criminal justice system was not effective in delivering justice, and therefore took matters into their own hands through netilantism.

For example, in the 2019 hunts for 'black police' acccused of using excessive force on protestors, internet netilantes typically disclosed not only the names and identification numbers of the police, but also personal information about their family members. The Hong Kong Supreme Court has issued an interim injunction against the 'unlawful and wilful' disclosure of personal information about individual police.[3] Previously, the Junior Police Officers' Association had won an injunction against the publishing of the electoral roll on similar grounds. At the same time, there are also forums, such as HK Leak, created to aid the hunt for the details of journalists and protestors. It is believed these forums are linked to the Chinese Communist Party as they are promoted on official Weibo sites such as those of the Chinese Communist Youth League and China Central Television (CCTV).

'Bulletproof' sites — sites registered on servers outside Hong Kong — have provided good protection for these netilantes. For example, HK Leak was registered on a Russian server, which made criminal investigation difficult and time-consuming.[4]

In Hong Kong, any return to social stability will require the rebuilding of trust between the police force and the citizenry. The latter will not stop doxing while ever there is the perception that the police are using illegal methods, including excessive force and triad connections, to control the populace and as long as activists and journalists are themselves targets of doxing by supporters of the police.