

OCCUPY TAIWAN

Mark Harrison

Heads Up

For twenty-four days in March and April 2014, student activists occupied Taiwan's parliament, the Legislative Yuan 立法院. The Sunflower Student Movement 太陽花學運, which successfully combined traditional forms of protest like the sit-in with viral campaigns on social media, captured the world's attention. Using technology such as the smartphone, the students created a politically savvy 'multi-platform' protest movement that has had a profound effect on Taiwan politics.

In recent years, the Taiwanese have coined the phrase *ditouzu* 低頭族, 'the tribe of the bowed heads', to describe young people bent over their smartphones — texting, playing games, updating their Facebook accounts, oblivious to what is going

around them. The phrase *ditouzu* expresses unease about how technology can disconnect people from society and an anxiety about whether public or civic life is even possible in a place like Taiwan today. As it turned out, smartphones (7.55 million were purchased in Taiwan in 2013 alone) helped to enable the political movements that transformed Taiwan politics and public life in 2014.

The Sunflower Student Movement's origins date back to 2010, when students from a number of universities began campaigning for students' rights on campus. Many university rules and ordinances had remained unchanged since the martial law era (1949–1987): universities retained the authority to exclude students from

courses and restrict their rights to assembly on the basis of their political beliefs. Two students in particular came to prominence: Lin Fei-fan 林飛帆 and Chen Wei-ting 陳為廷.

In 2012, these student activists extended the range of their activities beyond the campus to deal with larger issues in Taiwan's democratic system. In an alliance with journalists and other civic groups, they began a campaign against the concentration of media ownership in Taiwan. The specific target of their protests was the Want Want China Times Group 旺旺中時媒體集團. Want Want China Times 旺e報 is a Taiwan media conglomerate whose editorial position, if not explicitly supportive of the People's Republic of China and the Chinese Communist Party, considers Taiwan and mainland China as a single commercial market, one whose growth is in the common interests of people on both sides of the Taiwan Strait.

In the first years of this decade, the Want Want China Times Group made a number of corporate acquisitions. From control of the China Times Group of newspapers, the company took over the major free-to-air television provider CTV and then the cable provider CTi TV. In 2012, the company

made a bid for another cable television provider, CNS. The growing concentration of media ownership by a company with such a specific editorial agenda led to the creation of the Anti-Media Monopoly Movement 反媒體壟斷運動. It targeted Want Want China Times as well as the media regulator, the National Communications Commission, and demanded legislative changes to support media diversity. Activists within the Anti-Media Monopoly Movement argued that the media had a vital mission to sustain democracy through a diversity of opinions and editorial stances. The activists carried out their campaign for diversity and better regulation of the mainstream media across a range of social media platforms such as Facebook, creating a kind of alternative commons that accorded with the democratic ideals they believed in.

The subtext of the movement, sometimes explicit, at other times implicit, was the threat to Taiwan's democracy presented by the People's Republic of China. Student activists regard this threat as both political, from China's authoritarian Communist government, and corporate, as Taiwanese commercial interests willingly set aside democratic values to observe the



Yang Yi 杨毅, spokesman for the State Council's Taiwan Affairs Office, which is responsible for setting and implementing guidelines and policies related to Taiwan
Source: chinataiwan.org

People's Republic's ideological edicts in the pursuit of profit.

By mid-2013, in response to the campaign, the National Communications Commission ruled on the Want Want China Times acquisition of CNS, and required the company to divest itself of the news programming of its other cable provider, CTi. Another deal, by which a consortium with links to Want Want China sought to acquire the Taiwan interests of the Hong Kong-based Next Media group, collapsed when the bidders walked away from the deal.

The student activists quickly moved on to different issues. In 2013, they campaigned against urban and rural development projects that would have displaced long-established communities. These included those in rural

Miaoli 苗栗 as well as the old district of Huaguang 華光 in Taipei, where KMT veterans had lived for decades since fleeing the Communists' victory on the Mainland in 1949.

By late 2013, student and community activism in Taiwan had developed a distinctive style and set of practices: the 'multi-platform' activism mentioned above. On the one hand, students used traditional direct action, such as sit-ins, to forestall the demolition of Huaguang, resulting in their forcible removal by police in a violent confrontation. On the other, they also used social media and mobile communication, including the techniques of viral marketing, to circulate information and political ideas both online and on the streets. The protests have moved from issue to issue, but in each

instance, detailed online exposition, debate, and rich image-making supported the banners and slogans of direct action.

The result has been the creation of a vigorous and dynamically engaged community. Their online debates and real-world actions show that the contest over Taiwan's political future runs much deeper than the mainstream domestic Taiwan or international media coverage would indicate.

The Sunflower Student Movement

The Sunflower Student Movement was sparked in mid-2013 when the governments of Taiwan and mainland China approved the Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement (CSSTA).

As disquiet grew within the Legislative Yuan, the Black Island Nation Youth Alliance began to mobilise on campuses. The activists were troubled by the prospect that, without appropriate safeguards, access to education markets, financial services and the media would potentially give China leverage over Taiwan's social and cultural life. This concern expressed a deep-seated anxiety in Taiwan, a legacy of the martial law era, about the power of an unscrupulous state to

manipulate social identity, and a profound suspicion of the current motives of the KMT government in improving relations with China.

On 17 March 2014, after months of delay, and disregarding a previous agreement to conduct a clause-by-clause review of the CSSTA with the opposition Democratic Progressive Party, the KMT-led legislative committee charged with managing the debate unilaterally decided to send the agreement to the floor of the KMT-majority chamber, where it would be sure to pass. The following day, protesters, including student, civic groups and concerned citizens, began gathering outside the legislature. On the evening of 18 March, they entered the building and occupied the chamber. Nothing like this had happened before in the island's history.

Police tried to expel the students on the first night but failed. The students quickly mobilised support systems that they had developed during previous protest actions. Supporters supplied food, water, computers and mobile phones with Internet access, both to those inside the chamber and other groups gathering in the streets outside. The local media reported the occupation through their typically

partisan lenses, giving airtime to opinion-makers on one side of Taiwan's party political divide or the other to support or condemn the student activists. International media reports emphasised the anti-free trade element of the activists' concerns.

The mood among the protesters in the first week was tense, fuelled by rumours, information circulating on social media, and media speculation that there could be a strong police response. What is more, once they occupied the legislature, they were not quite sure what to do next. On the first weekend, a breakaway group of students stormed the nearby Executive Yuan, which houses the offices of the cabinet, and were violently ejected by riot police. Many were seriously injured, including one who was left in a coma for several days. The government predictably condemned the student occupiers for breaching democratic process; the students accused the government of the same.

By the second week, however, the occupation became institutionalised. The student occupiers developed a clear and focused message about the reasons for their actions and communicated it effectively through social media. Student supervisors regulated

movement in and out of the chamber. Their behaviour inside the chamber was always disciplined and controlled.

During the first week, a local florist brought a bunch of sunflowers to the legislative assembly building. The sunflowers, he said, symbolised the activists' campaign to shed light into the 'black box' of government dealing with mainland China. The movement began calling itself The Sunflower Student Movement. Yellow was added to the black of the Black Island Nation Youth Alliance, and black and yellow became the movement's colours.

Over the course of the occupation, the legislative building became the centre of a whole new array of improvised institutions, the hub of new paths of communication across Taipei and the island, and the focus of activities that brought together people from different walks of life. Part of the excitement around the occupation was the way it revealed an alternative set of political possibilities for Taiwan and transformed the relationship between the electorate and legislature.

On 30 March, hundreds of thousands of people rallied in support of the students, jamming the streets for blocks around the city centre. The massive show of public support, which

FROM THE MANUAL OF DISOBEDIENCE USED BY THE HONG KONG PROTESTORS

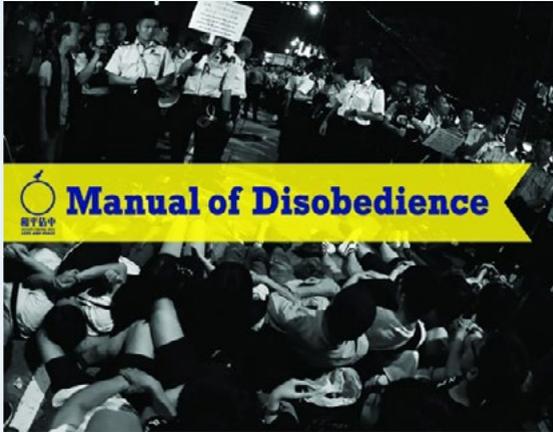
(1) Philosophy

1. Civil disobedience refers to acts of opposing injustice through refusing to comply with a law, decree or order. The participants will not resort to violence. Rather, they will proactively accept the due legal consequences. The acts have to display not only civility but also a disobedient attitude in refusing to co-operate with the unjust authorities, and to strive for societal changes through continuous protest. Genuine pacifism does not mean not to resist against evils, but to fight against evils squarely with non-violent means.
2. Using violence against violence will only intensify bias and fear, provide the government the excuse for suppression, and further empower the suppressors. Civil disobedience is to win over hatred with love. The participants should face sufferings with dignified attitude, so as to summon the conscience of the suppressors and to minimize the hatred underlying the acts of suppression. More importantly, non-violence will win over the empathy of bystanders, and expose the complete lack of legitimacy of the institutional violence applied to us by the suppressor. The self-sacrifice can arouse the awakening of the public.
3. The ultimate aim of the campaign is to establish a society embracing equality, tolerance, love and care. We fight against the unjust system, not individuals. We are not to destroy or humiliate the law enforcers, rather we are to win over their understanding and respect. Not only do we need to avoid physical confrontation, but also to avoid developing hatred in heart.
4. Occupy Central participants must strictly follow the principle of non-violence if we are to gain the understanding and support of the public. Protesters must not engage in physical or verbal conflicts with law enforcers, nor damage any public properties. When facing brutal force, you can act to protect your body but not fighting back. When facing arrest, protesters can form a human chain and lie down so as to make the arrest more difficult but not to struggle hard. Protestors should display a peaceful and rational attitude with dignity. They should keep reminding themselves to demonstrate virtues of higher standard than those of the suppressors, so as to gain the support of the society.



Occupy Central with Love and Peace is a civil disobedience movement that began in Hong Kong in September 2014. It called on protesters to block roads and paralyse Hong Kong's financial district if the Beijing and Hong Kong governments did not agree to implement universal suffrage for the chief executive election in 2017 and the Legislative Council elections in 2020

Photo: boxun.com



Occupy Central with Love and Peace advocacy group compiled a set of rules and guidelines for use during the protests
Source: oclphkenglish.wordpress.com

(2) Rules for Non-Violent Protest

1. Insist on the use of non-violence means. In the face of law enforcers and anti-Occupy Central demonstrators, never hurt anyone physically or mentally, or damage any properties.
2. Be brave in facing the authorities and accept the responsibilities of civil disobedience. Do not use any masks to cover faces.
3. Do not bring any weapons or anything that can be used as weapons.
4. When facing arrest, form a human chain and lie down to show our non-co-operation. Do not struggle hard so as to avoid injury.
5. Be bold in the face of violence. Do not try to hit back. Move to a safe place and ask for the help from the picket or medical team.
6. For the sake of consistent crowd control information, no one except designated personnel should use any loudspeakers. Do not put up any long flags or large posters that will block the views.
7. Leaders of the operation could be arrested anytime. Be prepared for changes in leadership and try to maintain good order all along.
8. Respect the decisions of OCLP. Any disagreements should only be reviewed after the operation. Avoid any action that may disrupt the operation.

accorded legitimacy to the student activists, proved a turning point with the government.

The ruling KMT seemed divided on how to respond to the protest, and at the end of the first week President Ma Ying-jeou 馬英九 gave a weak press conference in which he evaded hard questions about the occupation and the future of the trade agreement. The speaker of the Legislative Yuan, Wang Jin-pyng 王金平, a key rival to Ma in the KMT, opened negotiations with the student leadership himself. By this time, Lin Fei-fan and Chen Wei-ting had become more than just student leaders. As the faces of the occupation, they were celebrities, profiled in newspapers and on TV. Although the protesters were not unanimously in favour, the leaders agreed that they would leave the legislative assembly on 10 April. In return, the government promised a proper legislative review of the CSSTA and to set up institutional public oversight mechanisms for managing cross-Strait relations.

Despite the significant disruption caused by the protests, in the end, the parties came to a relatively peaceful resolution. Student movements in Taiwan since 2012 have generally sought to avoid confrontation with the police,

preferring rational debate and discussion in service of social justice and progress. They considered the process of negotiated settlement an expression of their democratic ideals.

Shared Destiny and the ‘Taiwan Question’

The movement showed up the weakness and isolation of the president in Taiwan. President Ma’s level of personal public approval hovers around the ten percent mark. At the same time, the authority of the office of the president in Taiwan is greatly limited by Taiwan’s geo-political relationships with China and the US. Since the first truly democratic presidential election on the island in 1996, the electoral process has been one of the pillars upon which Taiwan’s de facto sovereignty rests, and which in turn legitimises the office of the president. Yet the People’s Republic of China, both Taiwan’s chief trading partner and main security threat, considers the incorporation of the island into its territory a predestined national mission. From Beijing, Taiwan’s island story, the creation of a sovereign people through democratic principles and process, skewers China’s manifest destiny.

In his two terms in office, Ma Ying-jeou has attempted to obfuscate this problem by calling for practical, economic engagement, while avoiding the constant crises of his predecessors. A raft of new cross-Strait agreements allows tourists, students and government officials to move freely across the strait and reduce barriers to trade. Ma began with the support of Chinese president Hu Jintao; Xi Jinping seems content to continue the process of institutionalising cross-Strait relations as a means for realising a unified China.

The Sunflower Student Movement, which built on citizen activism and opposition to this institutionalisation, makes the governments on both sides nervous. The Chinese government reacted to the crisis mostly by ignoring it or offering platitudes about the continuing development of cross-Strait ties. When the official media in China mentions the movement explicitly it has only been to condemn it and associate it with Taiwan's inde-

pendence-leaning opposition Democratic Progressive Party. The student activists, meanwhile, mostly ignored China, focusing on democratic legislative process and the ruling KMT. Two leaders of the 1989 Beijing student movement, Wu'erkaixi 吾爾開希 and Wang Dan 王丹, both of whom live in Taiwan, joined the student occupiers, entering the legislative chamber in the first week. The students were by turns welcoming and dismissive of them, their reaction a reflection of the complex nature of the movement's politics.

International opinion may see the Taiwan problem as heading towards a 'natural' resolution of the incorporation of Taiwan into the People's Republic of China through the building of cross-Strait ties. Yet the emergence of a new, politically savvy, wired and connected generation of leaders and opinion-makers in Taiwan, who are anything but *ditouzu*, suggests that the 'Taiwan question' will test regional politics and security for years to come.

This text is taken from *Shared Destiny*, edited by Geremie R Barmé,
Linda Jaivin and Jeremy Goldkorn, published 2015 by ANU Press,
The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.