

Cyber Terrorism in name of Cyber Activism: Discomfort in looking at some derivative works in recent Hong Kong

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Abstract

Increased awareness of cyber activism and civil disobedience in Hong Kong has led to a concurrent proliferation of so-called 'derivative works.' These computer-manipulated images are created for, and disseminated via, the Internet in response to the contested political climate of the city. This paper treats such derivative works as visual evidences to examine the ethics of image-making and photographic manipulation within the milieu of Hong Kong. It also discusses the cyber behaviour and interchange of image consumption and production via the Internet. Selected derivative works from social media and discussion forum in Hong Kong are framed as political expressions in relation to debates about pornography, misogyny, racism and terrorism. The emancipatory nature of derivative image-making practices, specifically non-hierarchical dissemination, is contrasted with an argument that these same practices are seen as a form of cyber terrorism that reinforces hatred of the 'other.' Derivative works, I argue, are not merely images of personal and political expressions but sites that embed and shape ideological repression. An image democracy without gender and racial justices as well as image ethics is not a future of hope and promise.

Derivative Works and Cyber Activism

Derivative works are known as 'secondary creation' (*ji⁶ci³cong³zok³*) of parodic nature in Hong Kong. Derivative works are digital composites made by assembling found images from different sources on the Internet. The power of derivative works lies in their performativity. The image-maker needs not to engage in the act of photographing. Through assembling found images, a new image is created and uploaded on the Internet for further dissemination. The 'new' image may then be downloaded and transformed by another image-maker. This chain and cycle of creation and reproduction of image characterise the very performative nature of derivative works.

In recent Hong Kong, derivative works primarily function as cyber activism, in particular in forms of social commentary and political persuasion to current affairs and political reform. Similar to political comics and other satirical arts in Hong Kong, the propagandist intention of contemporary online derivative images most commonly achieved by simplified, sensational and

satirical portrayals of public figures and current affairs. Derivative works differentiate itself from the employment of visual references from entertainment, showbiz and cinema, for examples, the technique of screen capture and the simulation of image from screen. In contrast to traditional mass media, being factually correct (or politically correct) is not the key; rather attracting viewers' attention in very short browsing time is. Traditional visual media such as reportage photography aim to prompt sympathy from the viewers, by contrast derivative works discussed here are not sympathetic but largely sentimental and sensual.

In what follows, a selection of derivative works created in response to grassroots politics in recent Hong Kong are discussed in relation to identity politics. Derivative works are shown as sites of ideological conflict. Despite the democratic nature of participatory media, derivative works frequently show pornographic, misogynistic and racist portrayals of public figures for viewers' visual pleasure. My analysis begins with a diptych by comparing an original image (a screen capture) and subsequent derivative image (the pixelated), and discusses the use of pixelation as a gendered tactics.



Fig 1. A screen capture of a YouTube video uploaded by user 'Yim Fanning', 2013, screenshot. © Yim Fanning.

Misogyny through Pixelation and Insertion

Figure 1 is a screen capture of Leticia See-yin Lee at the inaugural event of Justice Alliance, a pro-establishment advocacy group. This screen capture, by only taking out a still image from the video footage, decontextualises the

event.¹ In the video footage, Lee dealt with chaos and crowds in the pedestrian zone in Mongkok, Kowloon and asked for help from the “Renmin” Police (the People’s Police); an expression that does not exist in the territory of Hong Kong. This screen capture does not capture any decisive moment of the event. The chaos and the conflicts of the event are instead distilled to a female protagonist, Lee, holding a microphone in her hand, with a videographer at the background. Between these two people there is a middle finger gesture pointing to Lee by an unknown third person.



Fig 2. A derivative work of Leticia See-yin Lee created by a Netizen. Source, Date and Author Unknown.

This screen capture was widely circulated on the Internet. A few derivative works subsequently emerged such as one of her holding an ice cream cone made by inserting a found image. The derivative work shown here does not involve inserting another image. Instead, the microphone in Lee’s hand was pixelated. (Figure 2) The visual connotation is hypnotic. We know Lee is holding a microphone in her hand but the pixelation treatment is a powerful cinematic reference to pornography, and we imply she is holding a penis in her hand. The maker’s implication and viewers’ imagination transgress the territories of the public and the public. The anonymous middle finger pointing towards her reinforces this sexual degradation as it simultaneously signifies an insult (literally ‘giving the finger’), a command, symbolic violence, condemnation, demeaning and hatred towards woman.

Pixelation of photographic images in the public sphere is predominately found in mass media these days, where it is applied to the faces of vulnerable populations such as children, victims and ‘celebrities’ in order to protect their privacy by making them ‘anonymised’ hence unidentifiable. The Japanese pornographic industry pixelates genitalia as required and imposed by publishing laws on censorship in name of public decency. [1] The mosaicked microphone in Lee’s hand connotes a female giving oral sex. This photographic manipulation

is characteristic of the visual rhetoric of derivative work, specifically that the meanings made of the derived may not share similarity to the original through deletion, changing and absence of context. Visual pleasure must be created in derivative works in order to attract viewers’ attention. This raises the question of whose visual pleasure does these derivative works and this use of pixelation serve?

In 2011, Reporters Without Borders publicised an advertising campaign titled ‘Censorship Tells the Wrong Story.’ The campaign, through pixelating various body parts of world leaders from news photography, creates unidentifiable body gestures with sexist and pornographic connotations. Unlike other publicity image, in this instance, pixelation is not used as a mean to protect one’s privacy. And such pixelation treatment opens up visual indeterminacy. The visual logic of this advertising campaign is straightforward. The pixelation implies the censorship of photographic images in the public sphere not only endangers freedom of press but also puts truth at risk. However, the choice of subject matter (think editorial angle), message conveyed, intention and impact in such portrayals should be called into question. The deliberately misleading image of a male touching a pixelated female body part (that is an act between Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton in the campaign) and an undetermined hand gesture of a male between his legs (performed by Vladimir Putin) are notwithstanding humorous, entertaining and appealing to many. However, the identity politics, and the racial and gender relationships embedded in these images reflects prejudicial gender and racial ideologies that are deep-rooted in our social and cultural values. Do these photographic manipulations help us in battles for freedom of speech? Or do they further reinforce the norms of sexism and male dominance? What is the cost to promote freedom of speech at the expense of gender and racial jokes? My observation is that these photographic manipulations are not only parodies but also means to typify the subject by reinforcing stereotypical parody. The typification process is not arbitrary, and in this discussion, the parody is subjected to women as sexualised objects.



Fig 3. Derivative works found on an adult discussion forum (www.5278.com) of Leticia See-yin Lee. Source, Date and Author Unknown.

The representation of women as sexualised objects is a common goal in image manipulation by the anonymous Netizen. Figure 3 shows two derivative works created by

¹ The images illustrate the inaugural event of Justice Alliance, a pro-establishment advocacy group led by Leticia See-yin Lee, on the 4th August 2013. A screen capture was made at 00:11 from the YouTube video. The video footage was uploaded by user ‘Yim Fanning,’ accessed December 30, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JoQ1bCaU1uw>.

Netizen typically appropriates a wanted ad of a massage parlour in Shenzhen, and inserts faces of Pro-establishment political activist like Lee in the style of *Being John Malkovich*. The name of the massage parlour was pixelated in order to make the place anonymous. Lee's Chinese name was then superimposed on the pixelated title to provide a fictional context. The Pro-Beijing spokeswoman becomes the target for sexual parody, if not sexually harassment. Another example is less sexually provocative but in this case male domination and female subordination is amplified figuratively. The anti-occupy leader Lee was pictured with Leung Chun-ying, the Chief Executive of the HKSAR Government. A news picture by photojournalist Martin Lam dated on the 2nd December 2014 from *Apple Daily* captures an official moment where Lee submitted a letter of public request to Leung to terminate the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong. In the derivative work, the context is dimmed to an immersive blackness, with the two protagonists leaning towards each other in the manner of *Gone with the Wind*. She is portrayed as submitting herself, instead of the public request, to Leung. They were pictured kissing each other in an awkward manner. Romance is only a façade. The gender stereotype played in this image reproduces and reinforces heteronormative patriarchy.



Fig 4. A derivative work of Leung Chun-ying and Leticia See-yin Lee appropriating a photographic image by Hong Kong photojournalist Martin Lam, 2014. Source and Author Unknown.

It is not only Pro-establishment and anti-occupy female political activist who is subjected to such sexist and stereotypical parody. Pro-democratic female politicians in Hong Kong are also targeted. Another series of derivative works play the ideas of the male gaze and male visual pleasure. The derivative tactic is, again, direct by inserting faces of Hong Kong politicians onto found images of protestors and criminals arrested by militants in other parts of the world. All male politicians were clothed and yet the face of Claudia Mo, the only

female politician in this series, was inserted into a female protestor with her upper torso exposed.² (Figure 5) This particular image appropriates American photographer Eric Wagner's work *Liberated: Arresting America* (2).³ [5] In Wagner's image, the female protestor was captured with a sense of hope and defiance on her face and political slogan painted on her bare stomach. The context of the "March For Women's Lives" provides a feminist and empowering reading of her voluntary baring of her chest. The derivative work does not prompt the idea of female empowerment, however. The local milieu in which the image was situated determines its meaning to Hong Kong viewers. This milieu includes, the political climate in Hong Kong, the relative obscurity of the original US image to local viewers, the cultural context and perception of displaying body in the public space, and the lack of a local feminist activism that includes baring the chest as a political pro-woman act.



Fig 5. A derivative work of Claudia Mo appropriating Eric Wagner's *Liberated: Arresting America* (2), 2004. 2014. Source and Author Unknown.

Claudia Mo was portrayed with no facial expression of hope or defiance. Given the milieu described above, she was depicted as a sexualised object and the hanging brassiere strap implies sexual violence, not self-determined liberation. In short, sexual parody in derivative works is gendered and context-specific. These gendered objects have little to do with empowerment of

² This series of derivative works was founded on hkgalden.com, a discussion forum that is derived from the Hong Kong's popular discussion forum hkgolden.com. The web platform (hkgalden) itself is a parody of the popular forum (hkgolden). Six derivative works are uploaded by user 'BIZHUB' under a discussion thread titled "Anti-occupy low-quality derivative works" and six pro-democratic politicians who were involved in the Umbrella Movement are subjected to parody, accessed December 30, 2015, <http://hkgalden.com/view/173707>

³ Eric Wagner's photo essay was dated on the 31st August 2004 where he captured an anti-Bush and anti-republican street protest in New York City, accessed December 30, 2015, <http://www.basetree.com/photos/no-mc/liberated-from-republicans.html>

woman and gender equality. Next we turn to the significance of these gendered visual manifestations created by Netizens and amateur image-makers. They habitually identified only by pseudonym and commonly mistaken for the ‘Anonymous.’

Discussions about gender politics of cyber activists, the identity politics of the ‘Anonymous,’ and the ultimate dark side of Internet freedom argue that the gamer and hacker culture is male-dominated and it is in this broad counter culture that the Anonymous and the cyber activists are most commonly situated by scholars. For example, media theorist Kriss Ravetto-Biagioli observes that cyber behaviour that is intentionally offensive results ‘toxic environments that silence voices – particularly those of the traditionally disenfranchised, i.e. women, people of colour, and the LGBT communities that Anonymous ridicules often and explicitly.’ (Ravetto-Biagioli, 2013:184) [2] A male-chauvinistic and racially superior attitude seem to dominate the culture of high-speed browsing and gain viewers’ fleeting attention, further visual exaggeration is thus employed. One should also note that the image-makers of derivative works are simultaneously consumer and producer of images on the Internet. One looks, grasps, appropriates, creates and uploads; and another generates a similar life cycle of image. These cyber behaviours are almost instant, in a click that is itself sometimes autonomous. The viewers who used to be the consumers of sexualised images are now also the producers of such images. Viewers are no longer passively reading images but actively engaged in making images and therefore part of constructing ideologies associated with those images. The aforementioned derivative works illustrate the unethical expressions in name of cyber activism and civil disobedience – they enable and perpetuate a misogynistic environment and render the utopia of image democratisation and the dystopia of discrimination and immorality.



Fig 6. A derivative work found on Facebook account ‘Pro-police Alliance’ with Chinese title ‘Pro-police organisation advocates ISIS massacre; pan-democrats and students are the targets,’ 2015. Author Unknown.

The Making of Cyber Terrorism

In the course of researching this paper, it has become clear that female political activists and political leaders have been targeted for sexual parody and hatred. Hatred

of woman is building up image after image. To look at derivative works subjected on women collectively suggests they do not only publicly shame a particular woman but womanhood *per se*. And the hatred is also extended to another dimension of global violence. This paper concludes with a brief discussion of another derivative work found on a Facebook account named ‘Pro-police Alliance’ (*Caang’Ging’Daai’Lyun’Mang’*) in Hong Kong which suggests future research into derivative images and cyber terrorism is needed. In Figure 6, fourteen male pro-democrats (including legislators and activists) and student leaders who were involved in Hong Kong’s Umbrella Movement were depicted (with their headshots inserted in a found image) wearing the orange jumpsuits first associated with US political prisoners detained at Guantanamo Bay and more recently associated with prisoners of ISIS that were executed. This derivative work is connected with ISIS use of orange jumpsuits, with one Internet commentaries saying, ‘Beheading them all!’ This derivative work typifies cyber terrorism. The politics of derivative works depends on the context in which they are made and seen, but their online dissemination means that the subtleties of personal, social-categorical, political, ideological, national and international meanings could not be easily separated. Derivative works which reinforce negative stereotypes and perpetuate hatred of other should not be explained by perceiving them as acts of parody, satire and harmless joke. The intention and implication of the satirical and parodic expressions should be cautiously handled. The future of images is not only about the degree of manipulation and technological advancement in ways to share and transform – it must include a debate about the ethics of image-making and sharing.

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