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Public diplomacy via Twitter: opportunities and tensions

Cheryl S. Y. Shea[a] and Francis L. F. Lee[b]

[a]Department of Communication Arts, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, USA; [b]School of Journalism and Communication, Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shatin, Hong Kong

ABSTRACT
One important aspect of the 2019 Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement was its efforts to appeal to the international community for support. While political activists lobbied foreign governments, and overseas Hong Konger associations held rallies and other activities, many ordinary Hong Kong citizens intentionally participated in the "international front" through social-media-based public diplomacy. This article examines pro-movement public diplomacy via Twitter, identifying its common narratives and main targets. It also highlights the tension between bottom-up public diplomacy by ordinary citizens and elite-led lobbying work. Thus, the article demonstrates both the opportunities and challenges that social media have introduced to a networked social movement.

Introduction

Appealing to foreign governments and the international community for support comprised one important strategy of the 2019 Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill (Anti-ELAB) Movement. Viewing Hong Kong as a cosmopolitan city, protesters recognized Hong Kong's visibility in the international media and its global connections as significant resources. Attention and support from the international community were perceived as a key source of pressure on local and Chinese states. Thus, protesters talked about an "international front" that comprised rallies held in Hong Kong, but the movement targeted international media and the general public through

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various activities and rallies held in the international arena, mobilization in diasporic communities, and activists' lobbying of foreign governments.

Furthermore, activists and ordinary citizens' efforts to appeal to foreign audiences via social media also comprised part of the international front. In fact, social media can be viewed as having lowered the threshold of participation for ordinary people to engage in public diplomacy (Seo, 2013). Through writing, tweeting, and retweeting protest-related posts, ordinary citizens could disseminate information worldwide, amplifying voices favorable to the Hong Kong movement and combatting pro-China commentators' views, including the so-called fifty-cents party (Steger, 2019). Some activists believed that the sheer number of people participating in public diplomacy could enhance international lobbying's efficacy (Lee, 2022).

However, past research also has noted that bottom-up participation facilitated by social media could introduce decentralization and internal tension into a movement (Lee & Chan, 2018). In the present case, it was not guaranteed that the views, narratives, and discourses proffered by ordinary protest supporters on Twitter would correspond with the discourses developed by the well-known activists connected to political circles in foreign countries. Thus, efforts at public diplomacy could conflict, instead of converge with each other.

Against such a backdrop, this article offers an overview of how Hong Kong protesters strategically utilized digital media technologies—Twitter in particular—to engage with international actors during the Anti-ELAB Movement. The article is based on an analysis of tweets under 13 hashtags addressing the Hong Kong protests from June 2019 to May 2020, supplemented by interviews with activists on the international front. The article demonstrates how ordinary people can engage in public diplomacy via social media. More generally, it illustrates both the opportunities and challenges that social media can bring to a networked social movement.

The emergence of public diplomacy in social movements

Although most protest movements target their local governments with demands for social and political changes in the domestic arena, many contemporary social movements have distinctive international dimensions. Protesters in different countries can support and learn from each other's tactics and strategies (e.g. the Milk Tea Alliance in East and Southeast Asia, see Schaffar & Praphakorn, 2021). Foreign governments can express concerns over local government repression, sometimes even by issuing threats of economic sanctions or military intervention to pressure local governments. Different civic associations and protest organizations can form

formal or informal networks and connections that bolster transnational solidarity and activism (Bennett, 2002).

While increasingly global interconnectedness in the past few decades has provided the backdrop for an intensification of social movements' international dimension, from movement actors' perspective, international connections certainly can be cultivated and proactively leveraged upon consciously during specific protest campaigns. The 2019 Anti-ELAB Movement in Hong Kong is a case in point. Although foreign lobbying and public diplomacy were not completely non-existent within past Hong Kong protests, when compared with earlier protest movements, such as the Umbrella Movement in 2014, the Anti-ELAB protests arguably marked the first time local protesters consciously emphasized the importance of appealing for international support (Lee, 2022; Lee et al., 2021). The result was promotion of a so-called international (battle)front. Local rallies and diasporic activists clearly were targeting an international audience. Activists proactively talked to the international media and lobbied foreign governments, particularly the US, to support the Hong Kong protests––not only symbolically, but also with concrete measures (e.g. the Human Rights and Democracy Act that the US government passed in November 2019).

Twitter diplomacy largely was embedded on the international front, which political activists initiated. Similar to extant studies about diasporic mobilization (e.g. Michaelsen, 2017; Quinsaat, 2013), the emergence of the international front during the 2019 protests can be understood through the lenses of political opportunities, resource mobilization, and political identity. First, perceived availability of political opportunities in the host country and the international arena could motivate protesters to engage in global outreach. If political opportunities in the domestic political system are viewed as limited, protesters could have additional incentives to turn to external parties to apply pressure on the domestic government (Keck & Sikkink, 1998). Therefore, promising signs in the international arena could trigger externally oriented efforts. In the case of Hong Kong, given the Chinese political system's close proximity, protesters recognized that an anti-authoritarian protest hardly could be successful without the international community's support. Simultaneously, the worsening relationship between China and the Western world, particularly the US, provided a relatively favorable foreign-lobbying environment (Lee et al., 2021).

Second, the presence of existing networks and resources contributed to the quick formation and upscaling of the international front within the movement. These existing networks and organizations, created at different points in the past few decades, were activated to facilitate overseas demonstrations and organizations (Ku, 2020; Lee, 2020). Younger politicians and activists also accumulated copious connections with foreign politicians and

civic associations from previous protest movements in more recent years (Lee, 2022). These laid the foundation for public diplomacy efforts to develop and continue to expand.

Third, Hong Kong citizens' identity shift also provided a backdrop for the international front's rise. Hong Kong citizens' Chinese national identity has been declining since 2008 (Steinhardt et al., 2018), and the growth of localism in the 2010s (Veg, 2017) has strengthened the local identity further and politicized the Hong Kong identity vs. Chinese identity dichotomy. The rejection of Chinese identity arguably has weakened Hong Kong citizens' reluctance to invite foreign countries to intervene in Hong Kong's affairs (Lee et al., 2021).

To sum up, perceived opportunities, existing mobilization structures, and an identity shift can be viewed as the three main factors behind the international front's emergence. However, against this backdrop, digital media's role also should be acknowledged, particularly regarding how it facilitated grassroots involvement in public diplomacy.

Digital media mobilization and networked public diplomacy on Twitter

Although governments or non-governmental organizations (NGOs) initiate most public diplomacy campaigns, social media's prevalence has enabled individuals to engage in public diplomacy (Van Ham, 2013). Unlike traditional transnational advocacy (Keck & Sikkink, 1998), local protesters no longer need to speak to the world through external organizations or mainstream international media.

Public and weak-tie-oriented broadcasting through Twitter has helped overcome borders, boundaries, and hierarchies in transnational political conversations (Murthy, 2013). Politicians and government officials typically set up their own Twitter accounts to engage in real-time interactions as part of their political identities (Shahin & Huang, 2019). During protests, news media organizations and foreign correspondents also help convey information and express their views to the global audience via Twitter (Luqiu & Lu, 2021). Online public gatherings, together with interactive functions such as mentions (@id) and retweets, not only benefit nation-level actors, but also enable ordinary users to reach out and promote their agendas. Besides facilitating "direct" dialogues with target audiences, these affordances are useful in increasing the public's reach by broadcasting their messages and solidifying their own networks (Surowiec & Miles, 2021). Twitter's public nature and amplification power facilitate bottom-up engagement and their topic visibility even when they are not the most influential in terms of followers (Surowiec & Miles, 2021).

Social media's proliferation has enabled more diffuse global communication, yet also has opened up ample opportunities for non-state actors to participate in public diplomacy. Primarily, it favors network building between pundits and the foreign public who share similar concerns and stances (Arsenault, 2009). Shifting from traditional one-way communication, in which the more powerful side controls the whole discussion, the new mode of networked public diplomacy enables more interactions between nations, activists, and citizens. This could add challenges to image management and narrative consistency with more different actors simultaneously (Park & Lim, 2014).

With this communication expansion potential realized, the practice of using Twitter to spread protesters' messages to capture global attention started as early as the 2014 Umbrella Movement (Wetzstein, 2017). However, the scale was much larger and the repertoires more sophisticated in 2019 (Lee, 2022). Unlike many countries where Twitter is a prominent social media platform that people use daily, the Twitter participation rate was only around 10% of the entire population of Hong Kong by early 2019 (Statcounter, 2019), much lower than Facebook's 65% penetration rate. Even when the Anti-ELAB Movement protests broke out in June 2019, not many people turned to Twitter. Instead, Facebook, Telegram, and the local discussion forum LIHKG were the primary platforms that protesters used to share information, discuss protest tactics, and coordinate activities (Lee et al., 2021). As the movement evolved, more LIHKG posts noted the need to extend their discussions onto Twitter where the fifty-cents party (pro-China Internet commentators) already had created an opinion climate unfavorable to the protests. Protesters sensed the urgency to amplify their voices on Twitter and engage the international community. In October 2019, the Twitter participation rate in Hong Kong skyrocketed to over 30% (Statcounter, 2019). Local protesters still used Twitter less frequently than LIHKG, Telegram, and Facebook, but it became a distinctly "foreign-oriented" site where people interested in public diplomacy congregated.

This article's first author conducted a systematic analysis of public diplomacy through Twitter during the Anti-ELAB Movement. The tweets were scrapped with a Python package, *GetOldTweet3*, under 14 specific hashtags[1] (Shea et al., In Press). The author first started with #HongKongProtests, the most commonly used hashtag during the movement. Based on the sampled tweets under #HongKongProtests, we included another 12 relevant hashtags mentioned most frequently in protest conversations on Twitter. For this study's purposes, only tweets with (@) mentions were selected, eliciting 88,000 tweets in the sample. Supplemented by overseas activists' experiences in our semi-structured interviews, the following section will discuss Twitter public diplomacy's opportunities and challenges.

Empowerment via alternative narratives and voice amplification

As early as 2010, plenty of pro-democracy activists had set up Twitter accounts and actively formed connections with foreign publics. These existing networks greatly contribute to counter-narratives, particularly when controversies arise. For instance, US news media reported protesters' storming of the Hong Kong Legislative Council Building on July 1 in a negative light. Jason[2], a member of Demosisto, wrote a long Twitter thread to explain protesters' actions. The thread reached 4 million users on Twitter worldwide. Jason attributed this wide reach to the group's years of networking with other foreign publics.

Besides the accumulated networks and activists' high visibility, the wide reach also reflected a collective effort among ordinary users during the movement. At the very beginning, some protesters set up a Twitter bot with selections of posts pertinent to the Hong Kong protests daily. Netizens could follow their real-time selected list of posts, retweet the content, and comment on them. The selection featured news reports and tweets by foreign and local politicians, journalists, and NGO leaders. Coordinating simple engagements, such as liking and retweeting, amplified voices that supported the protests.

Meanwhile, the movement's supporters on Twitter created a "target list" by actively mentioning the politicians perceived to be influential and willing to help. They then reached out to show their gratitude and ask for concrete actions. These mentions concentrated on a relatively limited number of political leaders. Table 1 presents the top 20 accounts with the most mentions under the 13 hashtags.

In our sample of 88,000 Hong Kong protest-related tweets with mentions, most of the mentions targeted US politicians, and 10 of the 20 entries in Table 1 are US politicians. Former US President Donald Trump had the highest number of mentions, followed by Chinese-American Republican activist Solomon Yue. The US Speaker of the House, Rep. Nancy Pelosi also ranked fourth. In fact, Yue became well-known among Hong Kong Twitter users only after the movement broke out. He was very responsive and retweeted a large number of ordinary users' tweets. Twitter as a public platform helps protesters expand their foreign networks and reward those who are more active and outspoken.

Unlike politicians who directly stated their support for Hong Kong, Trump seldom explicitly showed his support for the movement. He even framed the Hong Kong protest as a riot (Reuters, 2019). However, Trump still won dominant support from Hong Kong's protesters on Twitter. Aside from being the US president, Hong Kong protesters applauded his confrontational policy toward China:

Trump is the only #USA President who stood up to #China in trade policy. Obama never stood for anything. Stop reading the #Fakenews about

Table 1. Top accounts mentioned in the Hong Kong protest Twitter network.

	Name	In-Degree Index
1	**Donald Trump (@realDonaldTrump)**	4,101
2	**Solomon Yue (@SolomonYue)**	3,630
3	YouTube (@YouTube)	2,733
4	**Nancy Pelosi (@SpeakerPelosi)**	2,296
5	**Marco Rubio (@marcorubio)**	2,268
6	NBA (@NBA)	1,550
7	Hong Kong Police Force (@hkpoliceforce)	1,493
8	**Josh Hawley (@HawleyMO)**	1,328
9	**Ted Cruz (@tedcruz)**	1,237
10	**Jim McGovern (@RepMcGovern)**	1,178
11	**Mike Pompeo (@SecPompeo)**	1,144
12	**McConnell Press (@senatemajldr)**	1,059
13	BBC World (@BBCWorld)	1,041
14	Blizzard Entertainment (@Blizzard_Ent)	964
15	**Mike Pence (@VP)**	954
16	LeBron James (@KingJames)	953
17	Hong Kong Free Press (@HongKongFP)	907
18	Joshua Wong (@joshuawongcf)	880
19	New York Times (@nytimes)	862
20	United Nations (@UN)	835

Note. For the methodology details, see Shea et al. (In Press). Names in bold were US politicians. A higher in-degree index indicates one receives more mentioned in the same network.

@realDonaldTrump. Because of #realDonaldTrump, the #USA military was built back up and is the strongest in the world. #HongKong #HongKongProtests (@ElBoss757; December 12, 2019).

Within the context of the ongoing China-U.S. trade war, some Hong Kong protesters hoped Trump could weaken China's power and improve Hong Kong's political situation. Since Trump himself was active on Twitter, protesters viewed the platform as an important channel for drawing his attention. They narrated strategically to convey their targets' uniqueness through tweets that often highlighted distinctions between Trump's outspokenness and other political leaders' ambiguous rhetoric. Moreover, Hong Kong protesters not only asked for attention in general, but also called for more concrete actions, particularly when the Human Rights and Democracy Act was about to pass:

@realDonaldTrump Mr. President, please make a statement on what is happening in #HongKong. If you want the gen pop to possibly support a trade war with China, you need to speak out about this NOW. Make every possible resource available to them, shy of weapons #HongKongProtests (@spiderman_jon; August 13, 2019).

The narratives that Hong Kong Twitter users adopted also reflect how they perceived the geopolitical situation surrounding Hong Kong and China. Besides appealing to shared values or framing the Hong Kong protests as a humanitarian crisis, Hong Kong Twitter users were aware of the need to link their situation broadly to global interests. One meme circulated

widely on Twitter depicts a devil holding a sickle, with doors behind him labeled Tibet, Uyghur, and Hong Kong—already opened and with bloodshed on the floor. The devil is knocking on a door labeled "the world." Cultural artifacts like this framed China as a common enemy of Hong Kong and the world at large.

While most formal and informal overseas lobbying efforts have targeted foreign government officials and politicians, Hong Kong Twitter users also have targeted celebrities and companies. During the movement, several big brands were embroiled in disputes related to the Hong Kong protests. One prominent case entailed the controversies surrounding the National Basketball Association (NBA), whose account received the fifth-highest mentions on our network. In early October 2020, Houston Rockets General Manager Daryl Morey tweeted a message in support of the Hong Kong protests. Subsequently, Chinese netizens, the Chinese government, and Rockets business partners in China criticized the tweet and the team. The NBA and the team quickly reacted by distancing themselves from Morey's comments, with the NBA stating that the tweet was "regrettable." However, the Hong Kong protesters interpreted the NBA's reaction as a case of "kneeling down" in the face of Chinese money. In tweets that mentioned the NBA, protesters' posts viewed the incident as an example of China's influence and linked the Hong Kong protests with a defense of universal values:

#StandWithHongKong really means standing with the world's dignity and core values. Don't kowtow; don't be scared. We #HongKongProtests are fighting hard with you. We will be successful with every one of you. #standwithmorey @NBA (@loveby_elaine; October 7, 2019).

In this case, the Hong Kong Twitter users' narratives could be viewed as making a strategic move to link the Hong Kong protest movement to the China threat. The narrative highlighted China's expanding influence and called on all other countries to be alert. Therefore, the Hong Kong movement was not framed as a mere regional protest, but as a global issue. Meanwhile, tweets targeting corporations reminded these companies about possible fallout from their domestic and international markets.

These accessible technologies enabled grassroots users to be part of networked public diplomacy. Benefitting from their reach, they amplified political stars' voices and were able to reach out to diverse actors and gain greater agenda exposure in the public sphere (Lee, 2022).

Perception gap and tension between ordinary protesters and activists

The previous section demonstrated how ordinary protesters from Hong Kong engaged in strategic public diplomacy via social media. Protesters

understood the significance of putting Hong Kong into a global context that included China's relationships with the world. However, internal disagreements surfaced within the movement regarding preferred strategies and tactics. In the local arena, the disagreement centered on the preferability and justifiability of radical and violent movement tactics. On the international front, there were disagreements on the proper way to present the Hong Kong situation, i.e. whether to connect the movement with pro-independence movements' discourses in other countries, etc.

One discernible gap between ordinary protesters in Hong Kong and the senior activists engaging in foreign lobbying was their understanding of politics in specific foreign countries and the international arena at large. This was most conspicuous in the case of Hong Kong protesters' attitude toward Trump. The Twitter discourses, as mentioned in the previous section, illustrated how many Hong Kong citizens expected the Trump administration to confront China over Hong Kong. In fact, after Trump signed the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act, protesters held a rally in Hong Kong to thank the US for its support. This positive attitude toward Trump extended into 2020 and even into the US presidential election season that year. For example, in May 2020, in the face of the imminent establishment of the National Security Law (NSL) in Hong Kong, the owner of pro-democracy newspaper *Apple Daily,* Jimmy Lai, opened a Twitter account and initiated the hashtag campaign "#TrumpSavesHK." This campaign earned wide support on the LIHKG forum and gained over 11,000 signatures on the White House petition website.

However, such support for Trump was controversial among movement supporters in Hong Kong. Many activists and movement supporters viewed Trump as a right-wing populist leader who often violated the principle of democracy through his words and deeds. Some pointed out that Hong Kong citizens' support for Trump could cost the movement support from a large part of the American public. More importantly, from the perspective of activists conducting lobbying in the US, given the two-party democracy in place there, what one needs to help establish and maintain is a bipartisan consensus in the US about China and Hong Kong, instead of putting all the activist eggs in one basket. Jeffrey Ngo, a core member of the Hong Kong political party Demosisto, suggested that Trump's role was "not so important" in an interview with BBC News. However, some protesters viewed Ngo and other activists holding similar views as anti-Trump. Pro-Trump protesters reprimanded them and argued that they could not represent the voice of Hong Kong citizens. Some people initiated a poll on Twitter, and over 60% of the 4,000 people who voted wanted Ngo to withdraw from public diplomatic work.

Such conflicts between the Hong Kong-based protesters and overseas political activist-lobbyists were grounded partly in their ideological

differences and partly in their different understanding and perceptions of American politics. In our interviews with political activists abroad, several interviewees believed that Hong Kong protesters' affinity for Trump and Republicans illustrated their limited understanding of US politics. Audrey, a core member of NY4HK, opined that Hong Kong protesters had thought too well of Trump based solely on his seemingly unyielding stance against China, and that they tended to ignore the fact that Trump's actual deeds might not match his public stances. Furthermore, Jason from Demosisto pointed out that many Hong Kong protesters evaluated Republicans positively based on the belief that the Democrats were more pro-China. However, he argued that this belief is grounded on a misleading dichotomization of American politics. He contends that both US political parties view China the same way and that the differences between Democrats and Republicans lie mainly in performance and style, rather than substantive policies.

As activists based in the US for years, Jason and Audrey had ample opportunities to meet with politicians from both major US parties. Private meetings and networking enabled overseas activists to acquire a certain understanding of the US political system, but for purposes of the present analysis, it is not important to presume that the activists' understanding must be correct. The important point is that differences in perceptions led to conflicts in strategies.

Notably, the difference between the Hong Kong protesters on Twitter and the activist-lobbyists also lies in the time frame underlying their idea of public diplomacy. Many Hong Kong protesters seemingly were searching for a quick resolution to the Hong Kong situation, whereas the activists on the lobbying front recognized that lobbying and public diplomacy entail a long-term effort. In the case of the Human Rights and Democracy Act, although Trump signed the bill, a bipartisan group of US senators and representatives originally proposed it back in 2014. The movement might have sped up the bill's passage, but it took a long time to achieve something tangible. Thus, seeking bipartisan consensus is necessary.

Concluding remarks

Situated in the context of a contentious protest movement, the phenomenal involvement of grassroots Hong Kong Twitter users furthered understanding of public diplomacy in the networked age. Utilizing the power of the crowd, grassroots-initiated public diplomacy on Twitter amplified the supportive voices of foreign and local political influencers, created a pro-movement opinion climate on the platform, and called both political and non-political actors to action. However, the case of the Anti-ELAB

Movement also illustrated the uncertainties and potential conflicts that net-worked public diplomacy can introduce. There could be substantial differ-ences in how grassroots participants and experienced activists understand the international arena and the political scene in various host countries. They could have different time frames in mind, and they could differ from each other ideologically. Such differences generate intra-move-ment conflicts.

Therefore, this article points to how digital media can both empower a movement and elicit decentralization and fragmentation risks to it, similar to Lee and Chan (2018) analysis of the Umbrella Movement. Nevertheless, whether a movement can contain intra-movement conflicts and maintain solidarity is dependent on many factors. In the summer and early autumn of 2019, when Anti-ELAB protest mobilization in Hong Kong was at its peak and the atmosphere was relatively optimistic, the protesters seemingly were more capable of putting aside their differences for their common pur-pose. However, by the middle of 2020, when the protests had subsided due to a combination of government repression and the COVID pandemic, and as it became clear that the Chinese government would employ a strong hand and a hard-line approach to Hong Kong, a strong sense of frustration and desperation emerged. Thus, resolving or containing internal differences became a more difficult task.

Even more important than internal dissent was establishment of the aforementioned NSL in Hong Kong on June 30, 2020, which made a signifi-cantly adverse impact on the international front. According to the law, call-ing on foreign governments to sanction the Hong Kong or Chinese governments constitutes a criminal offense, and the penalty for this specific offense can be up to life imprisonment. During the post-NSL era, various pro-democracy political organizations, including Demosisto, were dis-banded, and many activists who had been active in international lobbying during the 2019 protests went into exile. Thus, it became virtually impos-sible for the locals to launch campaigns oriented toward the international community as they did in the past.

In line with the changing scene, the Twitter participation rate in Hong Kong decreased substantially. In May 2020, right after the announcement of upcoming NSL legislation, the Twitter participation rate in Hong Kong slumped to 13%, almost back to its early 2019 level, i.e. before the Anti-ELAB Movement (Statcounter, 2020). The conversation under the protest hashtags on Twitter also shifted to discussing concerns about the NSL and its impact on society. In the face of increased legal liability, Hong Kong Twitter users became more careful about their activities on the platform.

Ultimately, digital media can help human agency make history, but digital media must function and human beings must work under conditions

not of their own making. The 2019 Anti-ELAB Movement and its international front, aided by digital media, were powerful enough to turn the protests into an international issue and force the Chinese government to adopt rather radical measures to address the situation, though they were not powerful enough to ensure the democratization of Hong Kong.

Notes

1. The Hong Kong protest-relevant hashtags used in the study included #StandWithHongKong, #StandwithHK, #LiberateHongKong, #LiberateHK, #HongKongProtester, #HongKongProtests, #Wearehongkongers, #wearehkers, #hkpolicebrutality, #ProtectHKStudents, #hongkongpolice, #PassHKHumanRightsandDemocracyAct and #HKHumanRightsandDemocracyAct.
2. Pseudonyms are used.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Cheryl S. Y. Shea is a PhD student in the Department of Communication Arts, University of Wisconsin-Madison. Her research interests include political communication, media sociology, and public opinion.

Francis L. F. Lee is a professor in the School of Journalism and Communication, Chinese University of Hong Kong. He is the lead author of *Memories of Tiananmen: Politics and Processes of Collective Remembering in Hong Kong, 1989-2019* (Amsterdam University Press, 2021) and *Media and Protest Logics in the Digital Era: The Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong* (Oxford University Press, 2018).

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