Visual Diplomacy: Visual Politics and Liberal Imaginaries in Transnational Activism on Hong Kong

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Abstract

The 2019 Hong Kong Anti-Extradition Bill Movement (Anti-ELAB) marked a turning point in the global visibility of protest politics. Among its most innovative visual communication strategies was a crowdfunded, globally coordinated newspaper advertising campaign. These advertisements illustrate how non-state actors can practice a form of "visual diplomacy." This article situates the Anti-ELAB advertising campaign within broader debates on visual politics in international relations. As Roland Bleiker (2009), William A. Callahan (2015), and Lilie Chouliaraki (2006) demonstrate, images are constitutive of how world politics is imagined, mediated, and enacted. The article develops the concept of "visual diplomacy" to analyse how protest advertising operates as both agitprop and diplomacy: a form of networked symbolic action that forges transnational solidarities while also being constrained by dominant liberal repertoires. The Hong Kong case reveals the capacity of such practices to mobilize unprecedented global visibility, yet often only within the sandbox of familiar liberal aesthetics.

Keywords

Visual diplomacy, visual politics, design activism, transnational, Hong Kong

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Agitprop, originally formulated in the context of Marxist revolutionary movements, has long been understood as a hybrid practice of propaganda and agitation: the former addressing elites and party members through reasoned ideological argument, and the latter appealing more directly to the masses through affect, emotion, and mobilization (Berger 2017). Traditionally, agitprop was conceived as an internal political tool, oriented toward shaping public opinion, fostering party cohesion, and galvanizing uprisings within domestic contexts (Kenez 1985; Stites 1992). In recent decades, however, scholars have reconceptualized agitprop as a practice with diplomatic dimensions, capable of operating across borders and intervening in international relations by constructing narratives, forging transnational alliances, and influencing foreign publics. This expanded understanding builds on debates in public diplomacy, soft power, and transnational activism (Nye 2008; Sending, Pouliot & Neumann 2015), which highlight how non-state actors increasingly perform communicative functions traditionally reserved for states.

Ismangil and Schneider's (2023) notion of networked agitprop illustrates this shift. In their study of the 2019 Hong Kong anti-extradition protests, they show how protest art, memes, posters, and other artefacts created a shared visual common that circulated widely online and offline, enabling messages to travel beyond Hong Kong's borders. Such communicative forms were not limited to domestic mobilization but also operated as transnational identity work, fostering international solidarity and aligning the movement with broader discourses of

democracy and human rights. In this sense, agitprop becomes a tool of diplomacy, functioning through visual culture to engage external audiences and build symbolic alliances.

The work of Callahan (2020) and Chouliaraki (2013) reinforces this insight, arguing that images and symbols are central to the constitution of geopolitics. International relations is not solely the domain of institutional exchanges and governmental negotiations; it also unfolds through visual and symbolic practices that shape how publics, policymakers, and activists imagine world politics. Images, therefore, do not merely illustrate political struggles but actively constitute them, mediating solidarity, alliances, and antagonisms. When agitprop crosses into this terrain, it becomes what can be called visual diplomacy: a communicative practice in which images themselves act as diplomatic agents, transmitting values and grievances across borders, generating affective identification, and shaping geopolitical imaginaries.

Advertising, though most often associated with commercial marketing, offers a particularly powerful vehicle for this form of visual diplomacy. As Berger (2011) and Twitchell (2000) argue, advertising operates as a persuasive language that packages and sells identities, values, and worldviews. Political actors have long harnessed these techniques to promote candidates, programs, or causes. When social movements gain access to transnational media circuits, such as international newspapers, television, or digital platforms, they can deploy advertising as agitprop diplomacy: a means of producing high-impact visual campaigns that speak directly to global audiences. In such campaigns, affect, symbolism, and narrative coherence are not peripheral but central. High production values and striking visual clarity can align local struggles with globally recognized discourses of democracy, human rights, and social justice, thereby amplifying their legitimacy in international arenas.

The globally coordinated advertising campaign crowdfunded by anonymous Hong Kong people during the Anti-Extradition Bill Movement (Anti-ELAB) in 2019 exemplifies this logic of visual diplomacy. In the absence of formal diplomatic representation, protesters effectively assumed the role of non-state diplomats, purchasing full-page ads in major international newspapers such as *The New York Times*, *The Nihon Keizai Shimbun* (Nikkei), *The Liberty Times*, and *The Times*. These ads featured stark typographic manifestos and dramatic imagery of masked protesters confronting heavily armed police, deliberately crafted to resonate with liberal democratic values and to frame Hong Kong's struggle in terms recognizable to global publics. By inserting these visuals into the symbolic centre of liberal media ecologies, activists sought to mobilize international solidarity, draw attention to state repression, and align their cause with a universalist language of rights and freedoms.

This case raises pertinent questions about the potentials and limits of visual diplomacy in transnational activism. What, precisely, was mediated through these advertisements? How effectively did they perform diplomacy by mobilizing solidarity and reframing Hong Kong's struggle for international audiences? And what do they reveal about the constraints of visual politics when movements must operate within the dominant liberal imaginaries of global media? The 2019 Hong Kong campaign provides a critical site for theorizing visual diplomacy, not simply as symbolic persuasion, but as a reconfiguration of who gets to practice diplomacy and how geopolitical alliances are forged through images.

In response to these questions, this article examines the Anti-ELAB advertising campaign, which placed 11 full-page ads in newspapers across ten countries on 19 August 2019,

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followed by a further 18 ads in 13 countries between 20–30 August 2019. The study adopts a theoretical framework that combines Callahan's (2015) notion of cinematic geopolitical scripts, Bleiker's (2009) work on the aesthetic constitution and resonance of world politics, and Chouliaraki's (2006) theorization of ethical modes of spectatorship. Together, these approaches make it possible to interrogate how visual forms mediate political meaning, how aesthetic strategies shape emotional and cognitive responses, and how audiences are positioned ethically in relation to distant struggles. Through visual and discourse analysis, the article investigates the ways the campaign articulated Hong Kong's democratic movement for global audiences, the affective solidarities it sought to mobilize, and the ideological limits of its appeal when framed through liberal-democratic imaginaries. In so doing, the study aims to advance the conceptualization of visual diplomacy as a practice of non-state actors and to assess both its transformative potential and its constraints within contemporary international politics.

Towards a multidimensional framework for visual diplomacy

Conventional International Relations theories often privilege institutions, material power, and state-led diplomacy, while relegating culture and visuality to the margins. By contrast, scholars such as William A. Callahan (2015), Roland Bleiker (2009), and Lilie Chouliaraki (2006) demonstrate that images are not peripheral but central to how global politics is imagined, narrated, and contested. Their work highlights the capacity of visual culture to mobilize solidarity, produce ethical responses, and circulate geopolitical imaginaries; while also revealing the ideological limits that constrain these interventions.

Callahan (2015) advances the notion of cinematic geopolitical scripts, arguing that world politics is increasingly apprehended through visual narratives that cast protagonists, antagonists, and dramatic arcs. This perspective builds upon Roland Barthes' idea about the universality of narratives, "it begins with the very history of mankind and there nowhere is nor has been a people without narrative" (1977, p.79). The pervasiveness of narrative and its "almost infinite diversity of forms" (*ibid.*) explain how activist advertising can script local struggles as globally resonant dramas, positioning movements as protagonists within a liberal-democratic storyline. Bleiker (2009), in turn, theorizes the aesthetic constitution of politics, contending that form, style, and symbolism are integral to the production of meaning. His framework enables analysis of how activist campaigns deploy ordinary symbols and minimalist aesthetics to translate grassroots struggles into transnationally legible interventions. Finally, Chouliaraki (2006) explores the ethical modes of spectatorship through which media representations interpellate audiences, ranging from pity to admiration to solidarity. This resonates with Marshall McLuhan's (1994, p. 210) idea of the role of ads as "happy message loud and clear" to counterbalance "the penetrating power of bad news". Along this vein, Chouliaraki's work helps interrogate how visual activism mobilizes affect, while also cautioning against the risks of compassion fatigue, symbolic affirmation, and the reproduction of dominant liberal frames.

Taken together, these perspectives form a multidimensional framework for analysing visual diplomacy. The convergence of insights affirms that visual politics is both enabling and constraining: it can inscribe local struggles into global imaginaries and mobilize transnational solidarities, but often only within the boundaries of familiar liberal-democratic tropes. Applying this framework to the Anti-ELAB campaign highlights both the agency of non-state

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actors in performing diplomacy through images and the limits imposed by the symbolic currencies of recognition available in the global media ecology.

The Context of the Anti-ELAB Global Ad Campaign

The Anti-ELAB Movement emerged in response to a proposed law enabling extraditions from Hong Kong to mainland China. In June 2019, millions of Hong Kong residents poured onto the streets to oppose a proposed extradition bill that threatened to allow the transfer of criminal suspects to mainland China. While framed by the government as a technical legal amendment, the bill was widely interpreted as a profound threat to the city's autonomy and to the safety of political dissidents, journalists, and activists. It hence crystallized broader anxieties about the Chinese central government's encroachment on the "one country, two systems" framework established after the handover of the city from the British government in 1997.

The protesters who saw the bill jeopardizing judicial independence and endangering political dissidents found it unavoidable to voice out their concerns on the streets. Police violence and government intransigence escalated the protests, leading to months of unrest. In addition to local protests and digital social media campaigns, the protesters soon recognised the need to internationalize their struggle. Rather than emphasising their struggle as a local issue, they framed Hong Kong as a frontline in the global contest of democracy against authoritarianism. Increasingly expanding their international outreach, they aimed that pressure on the central Chinese government would no longer emerge solely from within Hong Kong. Diaspora communities organized rallies abroad. Student groups lobbied foreign parliaments. Protesters carried signs in English, Japanese, and other languages, anticipating international media coverage. To further gain international visibility and solidarity, one of the most innovative was the purchase of full-page advertisements in leading international newspapers.

The first wave of ads appeared before the G20 summit in Osaka in June 2019, when the Anti-ELAB Movement just began, targeting leaders and publics simultaneously. Subsequent ads coincided with symbolic dates like the 70th anniversary of the People's Republic of China (PRC) on 1 October 2019 and the United Nations' Human Rights Council session testified by Hong Kong celebrity activist Denise Ho in July 2019. This global print ad campaign, crowdfunded by Hong Kong people, not only the protesters, through online platforms, appeared in The New York Times in the United States, Dagens Nyheter in Sweden, Le Monde in France, The Nikkei in Japan, The Globe and Mail in Canada and Kyunghyang Shinmun in South Korea among many other outlets. Advertisements urging international support for Hong Kong's protest movement appeared in 11 newspapers across ten countries on 19 August 2019 with 18 more ads published in 13 countries between 20 August 2019 and 30 August 2019.

The ads discussed in this article were part of the most visible of these initiatives of full-page newspaper ads in liberal international outlets, which were known for their liberal audience in influential democratic nation-states. This strategy could be understood as visual diplomacy by non-state actors. Unlike formal diplomatic notes, these ads bypassed state channels to speak

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directly to global publics. They utilised the credibility of liberal media platforms, seeing them as vehicles for diplomacy even for non-state entities, like Hong Kong, whose local government, according to the Basic Law, possesses no formal diplomatic rights and relations without the mediation of the PRC. It sought to mobilise international civil society as a pressure point on foreign publicly elected political leaders.

The following analysis reveals how the Anti-ELAB ad campaign implements a visual rhetoric rooted in familiar liberal-democratic tropes: freedom, rights, solidarity, and universalism. It provides a close reading of some of the ads, situating each within its political context and examining how their visual vocabularies both enabled transnational alliances and risked limiting liberal imagination without material traction. It demonstrates the diverse aesthetic strategies employed to communicate a local struggle in transnational registers. Three key dimensions underline the findings across the campaign: (1) the politics of visual diplomacy as a non-state practice; (2) the campaign's relationship to liberal imaginaries and its confinement of symbolic politics; and (3) the implications for protest aesthetics, global solidarity, and the limits of affective mobilisation.

Visual Diplomacy Beyond the State

Diplomacy has traditionally been understood as the prerogative of states and intergovernmental organisations. Official proclamations, summits, and bilateral negotiations remain the authorised genres through which legitimacy and recognition are secured in international affairs. Hong Kong's Anti-ELAB print ad campaign therefore disrupted this statist monopoly by practicing what may be termed grassroots visual diplomacy. Through crowdfunding, digital coordination, and strategic media interventions, the Hong Kong protesters appropriated the visual communicative forms of diplomacy to insert themselves into transnational arenas of perception and legitimation.

Three features characterise this non-state practice. First, it was decentralised. Unlike state-led diplomacy or exiled-government campaigns, all the ads of the campaign were conceived and financed by anonymous activists and citizens of the city on forums such as LIHKG - a multi-category forum website based in Hong Kong - and supported by transnational crowdfunding networks. This absence of centralised leadership demonstrates how digital infrastructures allow ordinary citizens to mobilise resources and intervene in global discourse at scales historically monopolised by states and international institutions. Second, the campaign derived symbolic legitimacy from its position within large-scale mainstream media ecologies. Full-page advertisements in outlets such as The New York Times, The Guardian, The Japan Times, and Le Monde carried a performative weight beyond their textual content. By occupying the authoritative spaces of trusted newspapers, the protesters appropriated institutional credibility, ensuring their appeals to be received as serious interventions into public debate rather than ephemeral, marginal propaganda. In these spaces, the ads engage in the "mediation of suffering" (Chouliaraki, 2006) where the global reader is invited to be an active moral witness. The medium of newspaper ads itself became geopolitical: each ad publication was a diplomatic act, situating Hong Kong within the arenas of global perception and normative judgment. Third, the campaign was fundamentally transnational. Its financing

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drew from Hong Kong citizens, diaspora communities, and international supporters. Its multilingual production tailored messages to diverse national publics, ensuring their resonance in liberal-democratic contexts worldwide. In this way, the ads circulated as more than statements of local grievance. They were visual interventions in broader global debates about democracy, authoritarianism, and solidarity.

The ad placed in Taiwan's Liberty Times (Figure 1) exemplifies this dynamic. Produced by the democracy initiative organised during the Anti-ELAB movement, Freedom HK, the ad adopted the form of a dense typographic open letter with the bold juxtaposition of the traditional Chinese characters meaning "totalitarianism" and "freedom." The placement of text, the weight of typography and the use of white space here construct a multimodal text (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2021) to render a solemn diplomatic aesthetic. The letter addressed in a rational, explanatory register with details of the protesters' grievances and demands in a format that mimicked the genre of editorial journalism. The design choice was deliberate. As Bleiker's framework (2009) reminds us, aesthetics is constitutive of politics: by adopting the style of reasoned deliberation, the ad secured resonance in Taiwan's vibrant democratic media environment, where editorial letters carry significant normative weight.



(Figure 1) The ad published on the Liberty Times in Taiwan.

The geopolitical significance of this ad placement is also striking. Taiwan occupies a unique position as both sympathetic audience and geopolitical mirror of Hong Kong's predicament. Like Hong Kong, Taiwan stands on the fault line of Chinese authoritarian expansion. While celebrated internationally as a liberal democracy, Taiwan is perpetually under the political

pressure and threat from the PRC's claims of its sovereignty. The repetition of the saying "Taiwan is an inseparable part of China" by the PRC diplomats and the growing tension with the PRC generated by the Democratic Progressive Party regime for a decade contributed to the direct and heavy visual weight of the Liberty Times' ad design. By utilizing a high-contrast black-and-red palette and oversized traditional Chinese characters against a white background, it creates a visual polemic with red representing the Chinese Communist party and black representing the Hong Kong protesters whose dress code was black. Callahan's insights (2006) into visual geopolitics illuminate how this Hong Kong ad staged solidarity between the two sites of Chinese contestation. The ad transformed Taiwan into a stage where Hong Kong's struggle was narrated as part of a shared geopolitical script of resisting authoritarian and totalitarian encroachment.

This resonance was not abstract but embedded in ongoing activist networks. Since the 2014 Sunflower Movement, Taiwanese activists had cultivated transnational ties with Hong Kong's pro-democracy movements, exchanging tactics, symbols, and discursive strategies (Kuo and Jiang 2021, Ho 2019, Wang 2017). The Sunflower Movement, which opposed further economic integration with China through the Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement, became a catalyst for solidarity between Taiwanese and Hong Kong activists (Gold and Veg 2020). In the Anti-ELAB movement, Taiwanese civil society organisations actively supported Hong Kong protesters by providing refuge, fundraising, and advocacy in international forums. The Liberty Times ad spoke to a public already primed for solidarity, translating a local struggle into a shared democratic project.

From Chouliaraki's perspective (2006), the ad's open-letter format further recalibrated spectatorship. Unlike visuals of suffering that elicit pity or images of heroism that inspire liberal-democratic conversation. It demanded recognition as potential political partners in a collective struggle against authoritarianism. Yet this communicative strategy also revealed the campaign's constraints. By operating within familiar liberal discursive conventions such as rational deliberation, editorial genres, and universalist tropes, the ad secured ethical resonance but remained confined to what may be described as a liberal confinement of symbolic politics. It invited solidarity without offering any material traction beyond symbolic affirmation.

This Liberty Times ads therefore represents how grassroots actors can practice visual diplomacy beyond the state by strategically situating their appeals in geopolitically charged contexts similar to their own regions such as Taiwan. Hong Kong protesters demonstrated the capacity of non-state actors to intervene in global publics through adopting a straightforward visual strategy to design the ad, especially Taiwan as one of the three remaining regions that still officially use traditional Chinese (Hong Kong and Macau are the other two). This choice of Traditional Chinese is a semiotic marker of shared identity. In the context of 'visual diplomacy,' it serves as a 'counter-hegemonic' tool against the Simplified Chinese used in China. So, as Bleiker (2009) and Callahan (2006) underscores, aesthetic choices shape what is perceptible and politically resonant with the medium itself as geopolitical spectacle. This Hong Kong Taiwanese ad exemplifies how protest aesthetics can operate as transnational

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diplomacy in mobilising attention and solidarity within the constraint of liberal communicative repertoires.

The Confinement of Liberal Imaginaries

While the Hong Kong protest advertisement campaign demonstrated remarkable ingenuity in mobilising global attention and solidarity, its imaginative horizons were circumscribed by the liberal-democratic frameworks it sought to engage. The Anti-ELAB ad campaign consistently aligned with familiar repertoires of universalist slogans and rational editorial forms. This alignment was strategic by guaranteeing legibility for non-local publics, policymakers, and international opinion-makers. However, it also simultaneously constrained the campaign's capacity to articulate alternative political imaginaries. Within the confinement of liberal imaginary, Hong Kong ads engaged in forms of visual and textual experimentation always within the parameters of liberal democracy as the normative horizon. Audiences were invited to recognise repression, imagine solidarity, and consider the stakes of authoritarian expansion, yet the fundamental structure of the global liberal order remained unchallenged.

Universalist slogans were central to this strategy. Headlines such as "Hong Kong's Today; The World's Tomorrow?" and "If We Fall, Who's Next?" (Figures 2 and 3) were deliberately designed to extend the local struggle of Hong Kong into a global register. Their declarative, minimalistic typography projected a sense of gravitas and urgency that was intelligible across liberal-democratic contexts. By invoking universality, these slogans framed Hong Kong not merely as a city in conflict but as a symbolic site whose fate carried implications for other liberal policies. Chouliaraki's concept (2006) of implicated spectatorship explains the use of this visual strategy because it positioned the readers in the UK, Germany, and Sweden as actors with a stake in the outcome. If they did not support Hong Kong protesters, they would be the next community subject to authoritarianism. The question, "If we fall, who's next?" invites audiences to project themselves into the narrative not as distant observers. They were there to recognise that Hong Kong's vulnerability resonates with the security and freedoms of their own societies. In this way, the universalist slogans functioned less as neutral statements and more as ethical and political provocations, demanding recognition, and a sense of moral responsibility.

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(Figure 2) The domino ad published on Dagens Nyheter in Sweden and Aftenposten in Norway.

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(Figure 3) The ad depicting Hong Kong and the world as the same sheet of paper shredding by the Chinese Communist Party published on the Financial Times in the UK.

The use of rational editorial forms reinforced the legibility of these messages. Short letters dense with argumentation and structured like newspaper editorials allowed the campaign to adopt the register of reasoned public discourse familiar to liberal audiences. Similar to that on the Liberty Times in Taiwan, these ads in European outlets such as Dagens Nyheter in Sweden, Aftenposten in Norwegian, and the Financial Times in the UK were all formatted to resemble authoritative, analytical commentary with a clear layout of grievances, demands, and appeals for understanding. Depicting Hong Kong and the world as a single, continuous sheet of paper being shredded or from a single set of dominos, these two ads suggest an

elimination between the local and the global. From Bleiker's perspective (2009), these choices are again the form of communication that shapes political perception itself. Editorial conventions signal rationality, credibility, and deliberative seriousness. The campaign's claims are absorbed within the moral and intellectual frameworks of liberal publics. Callahan's notion of cinematic visual geopolitics (2015) further enriches this interpretation. The act of placing a reasoned, carefully structured message in prestigious and credible media spaces constitutes a form of non-state diplomatic performance as it positions Hong Kong's struggle within the arena of international perception where political legitimacy is recognised and contested.

The transnational circulation of these universalist and editorial forms was deeply embedded within broader geopolitical contexts. European audiences, different from the Taiwanese audience, were targeted less for their cultural alignment. In addition to their liberal-democratic norms, the continent has complex economic and political relations with China by framing their China policy in terms of balancing trade relations with human rights concerns. By placing advertisements in Dagens Nyheter and Aftenposten, Hong Kong activists strategically intervened in spaces where liberal publics and policymakers were already attuned to the tension between economic engagement and political values. The Financial Times, with its global readership and influence among economic and policy elites, allowed activists to frame Hong Kong's struggle as a geopolitical and moral issue with potential ramifications for global stability and liberal international norms. In this way, the campaign's visual rhetoric leveraged existing anxieties about authoritarian expansion, particularly China's growing influence in Europe and in the global economy. These ads translated them into ethical and political imperatives through universalist and editorial framing.

The historical memory of Cold War politics and liberal-democratic imaginaries further amplified the impact of universalist slogans. The operation of memories of past political conflicts depends on the present interpretations of those conflicts. This link between memory and historical events can outline a moral framework of present-day European politics based on the past crises of western modernity, including the Soviet Union's oppression against its people on freedom of speech and democracy (Misztal, 2003, pp.140-3). European publics have therefore historically assembled and reconstructed memories for interpreting narratives of "freedom versus authoritarianism" through familiar moral and geopolitical lenses since the end of the Second World War. Slogans such as "If We Fall, Who's Next?" resonated because they implicitly invoked domino-theory logic: Hong Kong was staged as a potential harbinger of authoritarian expansion beyond East Asia, affecting Taiwan and other liberal democracies in Europe. By embedding the Hong Kong struggle within these historical imaginaries, the campaign made its stakes legible and urgent to distant publics, even if the imaginative horizon remained constrained. Callahan's framework reminds us that such cinematic geopolitics produces narratives of moral and temporal causality. Hong Kong is the protagonist of an opening act in a drama whose sequels involve global actors and audiences in the upcoming acts.

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The interplay between universalist slogans and editorial rationality also demonstrates the careful calibration of affect and cognition. Whereas emotive appeals might elicit immediate affective reactions, rational editorial forms invite deliberation and reflection, enhancing the ethical and political authority of the message. Chouliaraki's theory (2006) highlights that these appeals position audiences as implicated spectators who must comprehend the stakes and, ideally, align their moral reasoning with the campaign's perspective. The combination of declarative slogans and editorial form thus constitutes a dual strategy: the universalist message engages the imagination and projects stakes globally, while the editorial form provides legitimacy, credibility, and ethical framing. They both reinforce the sense that audiences are witnessing and participating in a transnational democratic discourse.

Yet precisely because these strategies were designed to maximise resonance and legibility, they were and had to be bound by the rules of the liberal sandbox. The imaginative terrain of the campaign was limited to scenarios and ethical logics recognisable within existing liberal frameworks. European readers were encouraged to see themselves as morally implicated and ethically responsible without being challenged for other underlying structural inequalities, global hierarchies, or alternative ways of conceiving political solidarity. In effect, the confinement ensured that the campaign could operate powerfully within the moral and aesthetic norms of liberal publics even though it constrained the capacity for these messages to inspire radical or unorthodox forms of political imagination. The European ads reflect this duality. In the ad on Dagens Nyheter and Aftenposten, the typographic minimalism of the advertisement foregrounded the declarative slogan, projecting urgency, and universality. The Financial Times ad employed a declarative headline and structured prose to frame Hong Kong's repression as a matter of global concern, emphasising its relation to China's growing influence in the globe. It also evinces that, essentially, the ideological and cultural binary between Hong Kong and China becomes more extreme, promulgating this kind of visual diplomacy. In each case, universalist slogans and editorial forms allowed Hong Kong's local struggle to be translated into a European moral and geopolitical imaginary, one legible to audiences attuned to liberal-democratic norms and the ethical imperatives of global solidarity.

Such a focus on universalist slogans and rational editorial forms indicate the ways in which the Hong Kong campaign strategically navigated the liberal confinement. By projecting local struggle onto global stages and situating ethical stakes within recognisable liberal frameworks, the Anti-ELAB campaign mobilised attention, concern, and moral reflection in another continent. As the Taiwanese ad, the ads in the European news outlets reveal the inherent tension in transnational protest aesthetics: to communicate widely and legibly, activists often operate within predefined imaginative and normative boundaries, achieving visibility and symbolic influence despite its limitation on their capacity to disrupt or expand liberal-democratic imaginaries.

The Ethics of Spectatorship

The ethical dimension of the Anti-ELAB ad campaign constitutes a critical lens for understanding its transnational impact and the ways in which global publics were interpellated into moral engagement. Drawing upon Chouliaraki's theory (2006) of the

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spectatorship of suffering, the ads can be seen as active mediators of ethical responsibility, structuring how audiences across the world perceive, emotionally respond to, and potentially act upon the unfolding events in Hong Kong. Through careful calibration of human rights discourse, solidarity branding, and heroic youth imagery, the campaign constructed multiple ethical registers. Simultaneously mobilising empathy, admiration, and moral identification, the ads exemplified the complex interplay between affect, aesthetics, and geopolitics in visual activism and visual diplomacy.

Human rights discourse served as the backbone of the campaign's ethical appeal. Many ads in the campaign foregrounded police violence, arbitrary detentions, and suppression of protest by dramatizing the asymmetry of power between protesters and the state. The Dagens Industri ads (Figure 4), with the headline "Hong Kong is crying out for help," typifies this approach. The stark presentation of the city's plight, juxtaposing images of unarmed protesters with authoritative armed police, framed the struggle in terms of universal human rights violations. By emphasizing accountability, this underscores the power disparity between the state as the aggressor and the protesters as victims. These visuals functioned as moral instruments, drawing distant audiences into an ethical narrative that demanded recognition and concern. Chouliaraki's framework (2006) clarifies the mechanisms at play: spectatorship here is designed to elicit moral responsibility rather than passive pity, inviting the readers to consider their own ethical stakes in the broader global context. Bleiker (2009) further complements this idea by emphasizing how the aesthetics of these ads, including the composition, contrast, and dramatic framing of victims and aggressors, resonate affectively by shaping readers' perception of injustice beyond the mere conveyance of factual information. Situating these representations within the domain of visual geopolitics, this reiterates how this kind of imagery constructs Hong Kong not merely as a site of local struggle and the Anti-ELAB movement not as local affairs. Hong Kong was a node in a global moral and political field, where liberal values and democratic freedoms were understood to be under threat.

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(Figure 4) The Anti-ELAB full-page ad on Dagens industri with the headline “Hong Kong is crying out for help.”

The transnational publication of the ads further contextualises their ethical function. In the UK and Germany, ads in The Guardian and Süddeutsche Zeitung during the G20 summit in 2019 (Figures 5 and 6) strategically targeted readers with heightened awareness of global political crises and economic interdependencies. Placing the Hong Kong’s struggle within international newspapers that frames political events in ethical and geopolitical terms, Hong Kong protesters effectively transformed a local protest into a narrative with global moral urgency. European audiences, particularly in liberal democracies like Germany and Sweden, were already attuned to discourses of human rights and the responsibilities of democratic states to uphold them. Ads in Süddeutsche Zeitung (Figure 6) and Dagens Nyheter (Figure 4) leveraged this normative framework, amplifying the ethical stakes of the Hong Kong protests. The photo of the policemen with pepper sprays and batons at the top right chasing the unarmed protesters at the bottom left forms a vector of aggression under an asymmetry of power. They also aligned with liberal expectations of justice, accountability, and civic responsibility. By framing the protests as an emblematic struggle for freedom and rights, the ads situated ethical engagement as an imperative for these audiences. The ads were invitations to them to recognise Hong Kong’s suffering as both a moral and geopolitical concern.

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(Figures 5 and 6) Ads in the UK's The Guardian (left) and Germany's Süddeutsche Zeitung (right) during the G20 summit in 2019.

In the East Asian context, the Anti-ELAB ads deployed comparable strategies with region-specific resonance. Publications such as The Nikkei in Japan and Kyunghyang Shinmun in South Korea (Figures 7 and 8) featured ads that highlighted state violence and repression in order to appeal to ethical sensibilities and regional political anxieties. Japan and South Korea occupy delicate geopolitical positions vis-à-vis China due to their close tie with trade alongside security considerations with the protection of democratic values in the region. Framing Hong Kong's struggle in terms of human rights violations and democratic suppression, the two ads thus invoked ethical solidarity and signalled the broader geopolitical consequences of authoritarian expansion. Similar to the ad on the Liberty Times in Taiwan, the ads carried full-page letters and appeals in Japanese and Korean, respectively. The human rights discourse intersected with existential concerns as these two countries are neighbours to an expanding authoritarian regime. Hong Kong's fate was shaped as a direct proxy for their own security and democratic survival. The ethical stakes were immediate, compelling the audiences to recognise moral responsibility and political necessity in supporting the movement.

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(Figures 7 and 8) Ads in the Nikkei in Japan (left) and the Kyunghyang Shinmun in South Korea (right).

Solidarity branding hence constitutes a significant dimension of ethical spectatorship in the campaign. Through repeated visual motifs, notably umbrellas, yellow ribbons, and stylised Bauhinia flowers or Hong Kong's city flag, the ads (e.g. Figure 9) cultivated a sense of transnational community. As Bleiker (2009) interprets, when images as everyday aesthetics enter the realm of world politics, ordinary objects, gestures, and personas acquire global significance by being recoded through political campaigns. Bold slogans and headlines, such as "In solidarity with Hong Kong" and "Don't let Hong Kong fall" (Figures 10 and 11), produced the impression of a constituted international coalition. These design choices suggest to audiences that participation in moral support is both normative and collective. As ethical appeals, these aesthetic strategies as constitutive of politics make the concept of solidarity tangible through visual and typographic repetition. Chouliaraki (2006), however, notes the ethical ambivalence embedded in this strategy. By abstracting solidarity into repeated words and symbols, the ads may bypass the immediacy of suffering as they focus on a celebratory or ecstatic mode of spectatorship. Audiences are invited to feel connected and morally responsible. But they are likely to be the primary members of a global liberal-democratic community rather than as the agents enacting material support or intervention. The liberal imaginary reproduced here is more powerful in mobilising ethical identification than in provoking structural or policy change. Boosting such an ethical mobilisation further, the ad placed on the Nikkei (Figure 7) generated even more publicity and attention to the movement by being nominated for the Nikkei Advertising Awards. The completely blank white

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background reinforces the vector of visual impact as the metal bullet hits the fragile egg. The bullet does not only represent the weapon the state was adopting but also the 'hardness' of the measure the state was implementing to suppress its unarmed citizens and dissidents. This reaffirmed the strategic use of visual cues to connect with overseas democratic community. The ad depicting an egg hit by a bullet is embedded with a visual metaphor with two layers of meaning: the egg represents the fragility of the unarmed protesters against the police as much as the incident of the female protestor's eye that got shot by the rubber bullet from the police. The award nomination for this ad from the major media subsequently drove an even greater attention to the movement, aligning again with Bleiker's notion (2009) of the aesthetic power and reflecting the essence of advertising in guiding mass attention and inspiration.



(Figure 9) Ad with the iconic Umbrella symbol published on the Asahi Shimbun in Japan in June 2019.



(Figures 10 and 11) Ads in French (left) and Spanish (right) with headlines “Long live free Hong Kong! In solidarity with Hong Kong” and “Don’t let Hong Kong fall.”

The Anti-ELAB ad campaign orchestrated multiple modes of spectatorship to engage different affective registers. Human rights discourse appeals to moral outrage and the ethical imperative to act against injustice, solidarity branding invites celebratory identification with transnational alliances. The ads’ strategic combination of these registers allowed them to reach diverse audiences across Europe and East Asia, adapting to local political sensitivities while maintaining a coherent transnational ethical narrative. This careful calibration of affect then reveals inherent tensions. Excessive emphasis on victimhood risks compassion fatigue or detachment and solidarity branding risks superficial engagement. The campaign’s achievement depends on balancing these modes of spectatorship to sustain attention, recognition, and moral engagement without alienating or overwhelming audiences.

Moreover, the geopolitical context shapes both the reach and limitations of these ethical appeals. In Europe, the ads operated within public spheres aligned with human rights and liberal democratic norms, but these publics are also situated within broader economic and diplomatic engagements with China. Audiences may be morally compelled to support Hong Kong, governments, and corporate actors face realpolitik constraints. In East Asia, where democratic anxieties intersect with historical experiences of authoritarianism, the ethical appeal is heightened. Still, audiences are acutely aware of the delicate balance between moral responsibility and national or regional security concerns.

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The Politics of Recognition and Its Limits

In synthesising these dynamics, the Hong Kong protest advertisements reveal both the power and limits of contemporary visual ethics in transnational activism. The Anti-ELAB ad campaign reveals the double-edged nature of recognition politics. On one level, the ads sought recognition from international publics and governments. Their presence in major news outlets and mass media accumulated Hong Kong's visibility in the global liberal imagination, countering the PRC's attempts to delegitimise the movement as marginal or extremist. For local protesters, this recognition provided morale, a sense that their struggle was seen and validated.

However, such recognition is not equivalent to and does not promise transformation. Whereas the campaign exemplified the dual nature of ethical spectatorship in contemporary visual diplomacy by calibrating affective registers and ethical appeals across diverse contexts and helped the Anti-ELAB Movement to achieve a certain extent of symbolic resonance and moral legibility, the reliance on familiar visual repertoires and liberal democratic imaginaries leads to the limitations of visual ethics. International audiences may be ethically mobilised without structurally empowered. The subsequent solidarity produced from reading the ads became performative rather than transformative. The most obvious example is that international sympathy, including the warning issued by the United Nations on the human rights of Hong Kong protesters, did not prevent the PRC from imposing the National Security Law in June 2020. This Law effectively ended the movement's capacity for open protest, meaning that the ads may have generated awareness but could not alter geopolitical realities.

A comparable debate emerges in relation to Occupy Wall Street (OWS). Critics frame it as a failure for not achieving concrete policy change (Sorkin 2012), whereas others, notably David Graeber (2013), regard it as a success in reshaping global discourse on inequality and reclaiming public space as a site of collective experimentation. Although OWS is often positioned as a precursor to movements such as Black Lives Matter and Extinction Rebellion, the trajectory of the 2019 Hong Kong protests diverges sharply: rather than generating an expanding field of activism, it culminated in repression, civic fragmentation, and intensified constraints on political expression. This contrast sharpens the stakes of evaluating the Anti-ELAB advertisements. Read through Graeber's emphasis on process and "prefigurative politics" - the attempt to enact alternative social relations within the movement itself - the campaign can be understood not simply as an appeal for external recognition, but as a refusal of the dominant state narrative and its alignment with liberal geopolitical norms. Its visual rhetoric positioned Hong Kong protesters within a moral binary, juxtaposing claims to democratic legitimacy against the coercive force of authoritarian governance. Yet the effects of such storytelling remain indeterminate: while the campaign may have contributed to shifts in international awareness and, potentially, to more accommodating immigration pathways in countries such as the UK, Canada, and Australia, these outcomes remain indirect and partial. The gap between visibility and structural change, therefore, persists even when visual strategies succeed on their own ethical and affective terms.

This gap between symbolic recognition and material change underscores the limits of visual diplomacy. Images can circulate rapidly, shaping perceptions and discourses, but they cannot by themselves shift power balances. The Anti-ELAB ad campaign reaffirms the possibilities

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and constraints of affective and ethical mediation in global visual politics. It justifies the continuous tension between the potential of protest visual production to globalise local struggles and the material reality that visibility does not necessarily translate into liberal changes. What the Hong Kong ads reflect is the complex interplay of affect, morality, and geopolitical context that transnational activism needs to navigate.

Conclusion

The newspaper ad campaign funded and organized by Hong Kong protesters during the Anti-ELAB Movement in 2019 demonstrates the power of visual politics in shaping transnational alliances and global imaginaries from the bottom up. By strategically adopting familiar repertoires of liberal aesthetics, universalist slogans, editorial formats, aesthetics for attention and calls for solidarity, the campaign positioned Hong Kong's local struggle as one of the symbolic cores of liberal-democratic media ecologies. It exemplified how decentralized, digitally coordinated activism can perform visual diplomacy on a global scale, inserting itself into the symbolic arenas of world politics in real time. Crowdfunded, transnationally networked, and timed to coincide with international events such as the G20 summit in Osaka and the UN Human Rights Council sessions in Geneva, the campaign was unprecedented in scope. It became, in effect, a symbolic performance of Hong Kong's belonging within a global liberal order.

Yet the very strategies that made the ads effective also revealed their limitations. By closely aligning with liberal repertoires, the campaign maximised legibility for foreign publics while narrowing its imaginative horizons. This alignment can be understood as a form of worldbuilding, in which a fictional world is created for the audience to buy-in. While worldbuilding is central to political image-making, it reflects a mode of "social constructivism" (Zaidi 2019). Advertising and branding function similarly: they construct immersive worlds and symbolic narratives through which audiences are invited to identify with particular products, causes, or values, but these worlds remain ideologically pre-packaged and constrained (Goldman & Papson 1996; Banet-Weiser 2012). Rather than directly determining outcomes such as sales or political change, such storytelling plays a formative role in shaping a brand's or a movement's ideological coherence and its longer-term trajectories. In this sense, the Anti-ELAB advertisements engaged in worldbuilding as a form of visual diplomacy, creating a symbolic universe of liberal-democratic struggle that was instantly recognizable to global audiences. Like branding, this worldbuilding generated coherence without guaranteeing immediate or material transformation. It mapped Hong Kong's resistance onto an already familiar ideological terrain of freedom versus authoritarianism, and rights versus repression. This paradox highlights the dual nature of visual diplomacy. On one hand, the campaign was strikingly innovative: decentralized, globally coordinated, aesthetically sophisticated, and capable of mobilizing rapid international attention. On the other hand, its ideological framing remained relatively conservative, reproducing Cold War-era binaries and reaffirming the centrality of pre-existing liberal norms. In doing so, it tended to idealise notions of freedom and democracy, presenting them as more internally coherent and universally realised than they are in practice. Its creativity was therefore located primarily in form, the orchestration of visuals, distribution networks, and symbolic timing, rather than in the articulation of fundamentally new political imaginaries.

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The idealism of this visual diplomacy also stood in stark contrast to China's "wolf warrior diplomacy", which combined hyper-nationalist rhetoric, aggressive posturing, and an insistence on sovereignty with accusations of Western hypocrisy (Martin 2021; Hall & Smith 2021). Whereas Beijing's diplomats framed the protests as violent, illegitimate, and externally manipulated, the protesters' ads sought to position themselves as guardians of universal democratic values. This clash of imaginaries produced a contested communicative battlefield: the protesters' branded liberal worldbuilding was met by the state's counter-claims that the campaign itself was evidence of "foreign interference" and U.S.-backed destabilization. In this way, the confinement of liberal solidarity not only limited the protesters' imaginative scope but also rendered them vulnerable to authoritarian counter-narratives. Their appeal to pre-existing liberal norms secured global sympathy but simultaneously allowed Beijing to delegitimize their efforts as propagandistic theater orchestrated by foreign powers. The moral victory has been won, but the hardship on the ground persists. The campaign thus illustrates both the potency and the precarity of advertising as visual diplomacy, effective in mobilizing solidarity across borders, yet easily undermined by rival geopolitical scripts.

In sum, the campaign underscores the importance of aesthetics in international politics. The Hong Kong ads exemplify the dynamic of images as active interventions that shape how politics is seen, felt, and imagined (Bleiker 2009, Callahan 2015, and Chouliaraki 2006). Their capacity to render the city's struggle legible and compelling to global publics was simultaneously a form of empowerment and a form of constraint. The advertising campaign illustrates both the promise and the peril of visual diplomacy in contemporary world politics. It succeeded in inserting Hong Kong's struggle into global symbolic arenas, mobilizing publics and policymakers through the aesthetics of liberal solidarity. Yet it also demonstrates how protest aesthetics risk becoming trapped within the confinement of familiar repertoires, achieving visibility and legitimacy without opening new horizons for political imagination. In the case of Hong Kong, visual diplomacy by non-state actors can both enable solidarity and limit imagination, producing recognition primarily through the affirmation of dominant liberal frameworks yet limited in their ability to reconfigure the deeper structures of international order.

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