Extradition as a “Women’s Issue”:
Notes Towards a Feminist Critique of the 2019 Hong Kong Anti-ELAB Protests
Written after 100 Days of Protest (with some updates from October 2019)

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Please note: This article refers to events leading up to the anti-ELAB movement and follows developments through the first one hundred days of the protests in mid-September. I also include a few updates from October 2019. In an upcoming post, I cover October-December 2019.

The demonstrations rocking Hong Kong in the summer of 2019 began with the murder of a woman in Taiwan in 2018. Chan Tong-kai,1 at one time enrolled in Polytechnic University’s Hong Kong Community College, strangled his pregnant girlfriend Poon Hiu-wing in February 2018 during a trip to Taiwan. The Hong Kong authorities arrested Chan after his return to the HKSAR, and Chan continues to be held on a money laundering conviction, since he used Poon’s ATM card after her demise. While in custody, Chan pled guilty to Poon’s murder.2 Taiwan sought Chan for Poon’s murder, however, due to the lack of any arrangements for the transfer of suspected criminals between Hong Kong and Taiwan, there was no legal avenue available through which to duly send Chan to Taiwan to stand trial. In February 2019, the HKSAR government proposed the Fugitive Offenders and Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters Legislation (Amendment) Bill 2019 (ELAB) to modify the Fugitive Offenders Ordinance and the Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters Ordinance, which would close this gap.3 This led to heated exchanges in the Legislative Council (LegCo), with a formal debate and vote scheduled for June 12. However, a mass demonstration on June 9 put the proceedings on hold. Eventually, Chief Executive Carrie Lam withdrew the bill on June 15, “killed” the bill on September 4, and, finally, LegCo formally withdrew it from consideration on October 23, 2019. Although the bill may or may not have done many things, it soon emerged that it would not have accomplished the extradition of Chan to Taiwan, since Taipei would not agree to any piece of Hong Kong legislation that fails to recognize its sovereignty, including the proposed bill.4 The fact that the PRC allows for the death penalty in murder cases while Hong Kong does not5 also could be an insurmountable obstacle to extradition in this particular case.

The wording of parts of the bill led to concerns that the net was wide enough to breach the ‘legal’ firewall and could, conceivably, put feminist/LGBTQ activists, journalists, publishers, lawyers, entrepreneurs, PRC dissidents from Xinjiang and Tibet, Taiwanese political figures, women involved in religious organizations such as the Falun Gong, NGOs supporting sex workers, domestic laborers, and reproductive rights advocates, among others, at risk of extradition to mainland China. Putting these developments into a broader context, the highly publicized cases of detention and police
harassment of feminist activists, including the Feminist Five, Ai Xiaoming, and Ye Haiyan, as well as the detention of Hong Kong’s Causeway Bay booksellers in the PRC fuel the passionate response to ELAB. Over seventy NGOs signed a collective statement on the reasons behind widespread opposition to the bill. The proposed legislation fails to recognize human rights abuses within the justice system of countries to which detainees may be sent, lacks any guarantee of minimum rights comparable to Hong Kong’s standards, and ignores the dangers of removing legislative oversight from the extradition process. International Domestic Workers Association, lala team, New Arrival Women League, PrideLab, Rainbow Action, Association for the Advancement of Feminism, Hong Kong Women Workers’ Association, feature among the signatories.6

Women have been on the front lines of the anti-ELAB protests from the very beginning, and this reflects a long history of women’s involvement in Hong Kong politics. However, their opinions are far from uniform.7 In an article in the South China Morning Post, Raquel Carvalho refers to a survey done by three Hong Kong universities that estimates 46% of the participants in the anti-ELAB protests are female.8 Carvalho quotes Susanne Choi Yuk-ping (Chinese U, Sociology):

I am not surprised that in this anti-extradition movement we have seen a lot of women taking to the streets, joining the marches, rallies and even [being] at the front line…I think all these experiences will certainly empower women, and make them feel they have a stake in society and that they can make change by directly participating.9

The executive leaders of both Hong Kong (Carrie Lam) and Taiwan (Tsai Ing-Wen) are female, and women have been mobilized on all sides of the extradition issue. Popular celebrity Denise Ho, a vocal advocate for LGBTQ rights since coming out as a lesbian in 2012, and Pansy Ho (billionaire daughter of Stanley Ho) who currently chairs the Hong Kong Federation of Women, have addressed the United Nations Human Rights Council. Denise Ho called for the UN to expel the PRC from the HRC in July on the grounds of their human rights violations and interference in Hong Kong’s “two systems” arrangement ratified by the Sino-British Joint Declaration and institutionalized through the Basic Law,10 while Pansy Ho, accompanied by her associate Annie Wu, condemned the anti-ELAB protesters as violating the rights of “ordinary citizens,” with reference to the fact the protests supposedly alienate mothers from their children, in September.11 Lawmaker Tanya Chan has also spoken out about the growing “humanitarian crisis” in Hong Kong.12 However, none of these women addressed the issue of the geopolitics of violence against women and the border between Hong Kong and Taiwan that looms large in this case. Chan claimed he murdered Poon because he became angry when he learned he did not father her unborn child, and the slippage between domestic violence and international law revolves around glaring inadequacies in how the global community treats women’s rights and related violations. The initial act of violence against a vulnerable13 woman travelling outside of Hong Kong that set the subsequent events in motion, however, stands as only the first in a long list of issues of concern to feminists that orbit the 2019 anti-ELAB protests.

1. Use of physical violence, sexual harassment, and various threats against women to silence them and discourage their participation in Hong Kong politics

As reported in the South China Morning Post, an ongoing survey conducted by the Association Concerning Sexual Violence Against Women finds:
…46 out of 221 respondents, as of noon on August 27, report having experienced sexual violence since the movement began. These reports include being touched in sensitive parts of the body, attempted sexual assault, and being humiliated by the use of sex-related language… Of the respondents, who are from different genders, 23 made allegations against police or other law enforcement officers, and eight said they had suffered abuse while in detention facilities. The survey also found there were 18 accusations against pro-establishment supporters, and four involving other demonstrators.14

a. Allegations against the police concerning sexual harassment

Most reports of sexual harassment during the 2014 Umbrella Movement involved counter-demonstrators, and complaints about the police targeted their reluctance to intervene and arrest perpetrators. However, in the 2019 demonstrations, complaints emerged against the police as perpetrators of sexual violence and for failing to follow proper police procedures in the course of duty. On August 5, male officers manhandled a female protestor during an arrest and exposed her underclothing. This prompted Linda Wong, executive director of the Association Concerning Sexual Violence Against Women, to write a letter to the South China Morning Post asking the following questions:

1. Was the handling of the female protester on August 5 caused by a lack of sufficient female officers at the scene? How many female officers in total were part of the operation?
2. Did the officers violate the Police General Orders?
3. Will the police conduct a proactive investigation into the incident?
4. Why was the female protester not handed over to the female officers soon after she was subdued?
5. Does an arrested person lose the right to adjust their clothing to prevent their private parts being exposed?15

Another protester, Ms. Lui (a pseudonym), accused the police of an “unnecessary and humiliating” strip search after her arrest during the demonstrations.16 Amnesty International lists full body searches in its statement on police overreach in the territory:

In one incident documented by Amnesty International, a female police officer forced a woman to strip completely and go through a full body search after she talked back to the officer; the officer mocked and belittled the woman.

The vast majority of arrested persons interviewed by Amnesty International had not had to go through a comparable search during the same phase of their detention, and several criminal lawyers in Hong Kong described such a strip search as inconsistent with procedure. The woman forced to go through the strip search felt degraded and continued, weeks later, to suffer distress.

Body searches affect the right to privacy and the inherent dignity of the person and therefore should not be carried out lightly by law enforcement officials. Police should
only carry out body searches professionally, by a person of the same sex and in the least intrusive manner possible, thus limiting as far as possible the inherently humiliating character of the search.\textsuperscript{17}

On August 28, the Hong Kong Women’s Coalition on Equal Opportunities (WOCEO) organized a #ProtestToo rally in Central to draw attention to the extent of police violence and procedural irregularities against women participating in the movement. On that occasion, Linda Wong spoke out directly linking police actions to the suppression of female participation in Hong Kong politics:

In the name of law enforcement, police are using sexual violence as an instrument of intimidation…They intend to silence women through sexual shame and humiliation, violating women’s right to bodily autonomy, as well as every person’s right to lawful assembly.\textsuperscript{18}

Further, The Women’s Foundation of Hong Kong issued a statement concerning the police, sexual violence, and the protests on September 4.\textsuperscript{19}

Other allegations, some as serious as rape, remain unsubstantiated; however, police practices at facilities such as the San Uk Ling Holding Centre close to the Chinese border in Hong Kong’s New Territories remain a subject of concern.\textsuperscript{20} Using sexual harassment as a form of intimidation may, however, have the opposite effect. For example, female protesters, who expressed concern over sexual violence perpetrated by the police, have given that as the primary motivation for their participation in the anti-ELAB movement.\textsuperscript{21}

\textbf{b. Accusations of the use of excessive force by the police against women (not necessarily of a sexual nature)}

Women in the protests as well as female journalists, passersby, and bystanders have accused the police of the use of excessive force. Rachel Smyth, a teacher from Australia, who suffered a head injury, remarked: “The police were so angry and they just used me as a way to release their anger. That’s what it felt like…”\textsuperscript{22}

The most well-publicized and controversial case involves an eye injury suffered by a woman (“K”) on the night of August 11 in Tsim Sha Tsui. Photographs of her serious eye injury flooded the Internet, and she quickly became a symbol of police brutality and excessive use of force.\textsuperscript{23} Controversy dogs her story, though, since the pro-establishment press questions her role as a medic in the demonstrations while also taking issue with the claim that the police fired the beanbag round that caused the injury. In fact, she challenged a court warrant obtained by the police to gain access to her medical records arguing that it was a breach of privacy and she was denied details of the warrant’s contents, which precluded her from taking legal action against the police. She successfully obtained an interim injunction which temporarily sealed her medical records pending the full hearing. She continues to be a contentious figure as both sides struggle around the issue of violence in the protests.\textsuperscript{24}

\textbf{c. Women placing themselves in harm’s way between the police and protesters}

Female bodies appear in photographic accounts of the demonstrations as human shields, pleading figures kneeling before the police, and advocates who verbally call the police out on questionable practices. “Shield girl,”\textsuperscript{25} “fierce granny,”\textsuperscript{26} Union-Jack-waving “Grandma Wong,”\textsuperscript{27} join the ranks of other women who put themselves between the police and protesters. Mothers in support of the protesters rallied on June 14\textsuperscript{28} and July 5,\textsuperscript{29} and continue to be a visible presence at other
d. Women and police technologies

Tear gas, pepper spray, and the dye used to mark protestors with a blue-tint blasted from water cannons may have a deleterious effect on breastfeeding and pregnant women around the protest sites. Cartoonist Badiucao satires this in an ersatz public service poster calling for women and babies to wear gas masks, goggles, and hardhats while nursing.

Facial recognition technology used by police to identify protestors and occasionally by demonstrators to identify police exercising excessive force or violating other norms has been widely criticized for inaccuracies based on the gender and racial biases of developers and programmers. This demonstrated gender bias makes the use of this technology problematic when identifying individual women for possible criminal prosecution or censure.

e. Violence against women perpetrated by counter-protesters

In addition to the taunts, threats, and unwanted physical contact suffered by women protesters, some particularly egregious examples of violence have emerged, including the stabbing of a woman (along with her male companions) at a Lennon Wall between two housing estates (Hau Tak Estate and King Lam Estate). Designed to allow the public to express their views with post-it notes, posters, photographs, and banners, these “democracy walls” named after John Lennon in reference to his (and wife Yoko Ono’s) anti-war activities in the 1960s and 1970s often attract the ire of those with opposing views.

Another particularly serious case involved a female school teacher injured by a knife-wielding counter-protester during a demonstration conducted by her pupils forming a human chain outside a secondary school. She stood between the attacker and the young demonstrators to protect them. Students have been very visible in the protests, and students and teachers from several all-girl schools
including Diocesan Girls' School have been particularly active in anti-ELAB demonstrations. While in some cases, it is difficult to say whether women and girls are targeted because of their gender, the online abuse that has accompanied these attacks seems to point to a specifically female-focused expression of political anger on the part of some men. A related issue involves police inaction and selective enforcement of the law. Authorities seem to place more emphasis on arresting women for illegal assembly than going after counter-demonstrators for sexual harassment and assault.

f. Death threats

Threats against the wives and children of police officers have been widely reported, and anxiety intensified after the report of an online leak of officers’ personal details. Carrie Lam has also received threats.41 Young women involved in the protests receive death threats as well, including the particularly egregious case of Leung Siu-yuk, who discovered “wanted” posters calling for her execution with her photograph and address provided.42

g. Online sexual harassment

Online sexual harassment has been varied and intense. In her article, “Rape threats, body-shaming and doctored photos: Hong Kong women protesters facing troll army,” Rose Troup Beuchanan reports sexual harassment of journalists as well as student protesters. Vicky Xiuzhong Xu, a Chinese Australian journalist, received rape threats. Xu remarked: “The insults that were towards me they were a really weird combination of nasty nationalism, sexism, and racism…I felt physically sick.” Mickey Leung Ho Wun, a secondary student had text in a photo altered from “I am a secondary school student” to ‘I am not wearing any underwear.” She is quoted as saying, “They are not attacking my views or anything, they just attack me because I am female.” Petula Ho suffered online vitriol from within the movement when she critiqued some of her fellow protestors’ tactical decisions. Online trolls also target police wives with accusations that they are engaging in “threesomes” while their husbands work overtime on the protest lines.

2. Labor actions against women participating in the protests

Several labor organizations and professional unions have publically condemned the extradition bill and taken part in demonstrations. Teachers, doctors, lawyers, airline employees, housewives and even civil servants have demonstrated against the bill and/or the police’s use of excessive force to subdue protestors. Women workers make up the majority of the membership of some of these labor/professional organizations, and women in leadership in particular suffer the consequences of supporting the anti-ELAB protests. For example, Rebecca Sy, chairwoman of Hong Kong Dragon Airlines Flight Attendants’ Association, lost her job because of her support of the demonstrations.

Because of their often precarious employment status, migrant domestic workers, largely from the Philippines and Indonesia, live in fear of losing their right to work in Hong Kong if they participate in protests or become embroiled in police dragnets rounding up anyone on the streets near “illegal assemblies.” One domestic worker quoted under the pseudonym Elena in the press notes:

The Filipino community also disagrees with the proposed bill. We have not seen anyone or any group publicly expressing support for it. Some Filipinos also joined peaceful marches from Victoria Park to Central….While we are not prohibited to join the rallies,
many are reluctant because of its possible implication to their work and visa status in Hong Kong.\textsuperscript{54}

As reported on Twitter, one particularly courageous domestic helper Yuli Riswati spends her Sundays reporting for the Indonesian publication, \textit{Migran Pos}.\textsuperscript{55} Female migrant workers struggle in Hong Kong with sexual predation, abuse, and harassment as well as low wages; however, they have few avenues to vent their grievances, and they suffer disproportionately from the threat of arrest and deportation if they participate in the protests.\textsuperscript{56}

3. Other institutional silencing of women
   \hspace{1em} a. Arrests and disqualifications

Even though the anti-ELAB movement promotes itself as “leaderless,” several prominent women have been singled out and arrested during the course of the protests. Althea Suen, a former president of the University of Hong Kong’s student union, was arrested on conspiracy charges in the wake of the damage done to the LegCo chambers on July 1 when protesters stormed the building and defaced some government property.\textsuperscript{57}

Agnes Chow, a veteran of the 2012 Scholarism movement to withdraw a requirement for “national education” that the students saw as PRC “brainwashing” from the school curriculum, was arrested on August 30 for allegedly inciting and participating in an illegal assembly\textsuperscript{58} and released on bail the same day.\textsuperscript{59} A few days later, the courts overturned a government prohibition against her running for office in the 2018 Legislative Council by-elections because of her political views.\textsuperscript{60}

Chow withdrew from the 2014 demonstrations because of overwhelming stress:

\begin{quote}
I have gained respect from everyone around me since I decided to join the social movement…However, this Umbrella Movement has wore me out physically and psychologically, and I am aware that I can no longer bear such a huge pressure. …I am sorry. But I am only a 17-year-old. I am very lost and tired in front of the exceptional pressure. I hope everyone can respect my decision.\textsuperscript{61}
\end{quote}

However, she rallied to run for office in 2018, giving up her dual-citizenship with the UK to do so, only to be disqualified before she even had a chance to be on the ballot because she advocates “self-determination” for Hong Kong.\textsuperscript{62} Given the fact she has been buffeted by the police, the courts, and the government for her political activities, her endurance in the face of the enormous opposition to her political participation must be lauded.\textsuperscript{63}

Sadly, under this pressure, other women—as well as men—have committed suicide after giving up hope for the future in the wake of the protests. Lawmaker Claudia Mo, for example, has called on protesters to "drop the martyr mentality…We need to remind them that it is not worth it. Time is always on the side of the young." \textsuperscript{64}

\hspace{1em} b. School regulations

Authorities at Diocesan Girls School ordered students wearing black masks (a sign of solidarity with the protestors) to replace them with green surgical masks at school. A group of alumnae of the school organized a rally in support of the students’ right to exercise their freedom of speech and conscience
through their choice to wear black masks. An organizer affirmed, “We expect our alma mater to lead by example by respecting and protecting her students’ freedom of expression.”

c. Parental custody

Parents have run afoul of Hong Kong protective services as well. A juvenile court removed two girls (and one boy) from parental custody after they were picked up following a documentary film screening in Sham Shui Po. Allegedly, after the screening, members of the audience attacked a nearby police station with bricks, and the three juveniles were among those arrested. However, removing them from their homes before trial seems punitive. Given women too often take the “blame” for the actions of their children, the court’s tacit condemnation of mothers for their inability to “control” their children’s political sentiments casts a shadow over the decision to remove the children from their parents’ custody.

d. Family pressure

While the press often frames family pressure in generational rather than gender terms, young women tend to suffer more than their male comrades from parental pressure to stay home and keep silent about their political views. In addition to Confucian values of filial piety and traditional patriarchal demands for female obedience to authority, the economic status of women plays a role. Given the wage gap, hiring biases, and other checks on women’s financial independence, constraints on women’s access to political expression often take the form of threats to “cut off” daughters. A female student protestor, using the pseudonym “Julia,” spoke of her parents as follows: “They were blackmailing me, eventually I just tore up the credit card and started lying about everything…”

e. Self-censorship

Women from the PRC supporting the anti-ELAB protesters express reluctance to speak out because of fears of reprisals from mainland authorities. However, some do go on record. Susan Li (pseudonym), a PRC student at HKU, for example, commented on the June 9 protest:

It was the first time I felt I had integrated into the city. In the past, I did not consider Hong Kong my home… For the first time, I felt that even though I was from the mainland, I was with you, the people of Hong Kong…No matter where we were from, we all wanted the government to withdraw the bill. We were all equal.

European, American, and other non-Han Chinese women fear accusations of being part of the “foreign influence” that the governments of Hong Kong and China have often accused as fomenting discord and instability in Hong Kong society, even if they were born in Hong Kong and/or are permanent residents with voting rights. Astrid Andersson, a doctoral student at HKU, who grew up in Hong Kong, states:

I am trying to take a bit of a back seat [in the protests] because I understand that the optics can be a bit confusing with a white person here, especially with the narrative from China being that it is orchestrated by [foreigners]. But I am here to show my support and add to the body count of people who disapprove. I just can’t stay at home when this is happening in my city.

Others make a conscious effort to avoid self-censorship. Jennifer Eagleton, originally from Australia, represents the Hong Kong Democratic Foundation and serves as a member of the pro-democracy Civic Party. She recognizes but overcomes the fear she feels about speaking out: “I don’t censor myself
because my views are already out on the internet. If I start being afraid of what I say, I think that’s the end.”

As Hong Kong continues to decolonize, global citizens and diasporic connections play a part in all aspects of society. Women’s role in this process has a long history, and, arguably, a continuing contribution to be made to the ongoing process of democraticization.

4. Women and protest culture

a. Symbolic use of female imagery

Images of women—real and imagined—take on symbolic significance in the circulation of materials for and against the government’s handling of the extradition bill.

i. Female protest icons

1. “an eye for an eye”

By far the most widely circulated images denouncing police brutality involve references to the eye injury “K” suffered during the August 11 demonstrations. Drawings, photographs, and other visual representations of people with a bandaged right eye challenge the police to “give back the eye” that they took from the young woman. Political cartoonist Badiucao, a mainland Chinese dissident based in Australia, uses a composite image with a reference to the injury in his commercial art. The most controversial appropriation of the woman’s eye injury takes the form of a Pepe the Frog cartoon figure with a bloody right eye. Given the character’s appropriation by the alt-right in the United States, the racist and xenophobic associations of Pepe tend to occlude the use of the cartoon as a catalyst for progressive thinking about police violence in Hong Kong.

2. Lady Liberty Hong Kong

The crowd-funded Lady Liberty Hong Kong provides a less abstract and more militant image of a female protestor. Standing opposite the monument to the 1989 Tiananmen protests on the University of Hong Kong campus, the white figurine depicts a female demonstrator with hard hat, goggles, protective respirator, backpack, and waist satchel. She carries an umbrella in one hand (a carryover from the 2014 demonstrations still used to deflect tear gas) and a black flag with a slogan “liberate Hong Kong, revolution of our times” in the other. The cross on her waist satchel and broken right goggle references “K,” who may be a medic and whose eye injury symbolizes police brutality.
3. Goddess of Democracy

A mainland Chinese student overturned a statue of the “Goddess of Democracy” at City University on July 23. The prototype for the female figure that resembles New York’s Statue of Liberty appeared during the 1989 demonstrations in Tian’anmen Square before their bloody suppression on June 4 of that year. As the thirtieth anniversary of June Fourth overlapped with demonstrations leading up to the June 12 violent escalation of the anti-ELAB protests, models of the 1989 statue link Hong Kong to earlier struggles through the female allegorical figure symbolizing the abstract values of liberty and democracy. The pro-Beijing iconoclast who toppled the statue paid a fine for taking his ire out on the figurine.

4. Romancing the female protester

Artists, including Chris Wong and Fung Kin Fan, have used a photograph, taken by James Pomfret published by Reuters, of a young heterosexual couple, decked out in full protective clothing, kissing as a basis for drawings calling attention to romantic love blossoming among the demonstrators. In fact, protesters use the dating app Tinder to organize protests as well as search for romantic partners. Journalists Aidan Jones and Jasmine Leung profile one such couple, Abby and Nick, in an article, “Love in the time of tear gas: Romance blossoms behind Hong Kong barricades,” published in the Hong Kong Free Press.
ii. Allegories of the nation

To counter these idealized and romanticized depictions of the protestors, cartoons of Hong Kong allegorized as a “spoiled” little girl circulate on mainland Chinese Internet platforms. Jeannette Ng observes:

Online propaganda… has produced cartoons showing China as a long-suffering mother whose infant daughter Hong Kong was snatched away from her loving arms only to be returned as a tantrum-throwing toddler, refusing her multitude of gifts…The criticism of Hong Kong as a bratty little girl refusing the many gifts of her mother draws as much on these more recent stereotypes as anything from the time of Confucius. 85

It is important to note Hong Kong is both infantilized and feminized in these images minimizing political demands using sexist imagery and appealing to fears for the purity of the nation.

b. Women as creators of protest literature and art

The 2019 protests have seen an outpouring of creativity by people involved in the movement. While much of the artwork remains anonymous,86 several women stand out as authors. Two female poets, Tammy Lai-Ming Ho from PEN and Kate Rogers, are mentioned by Nicole Baute in her article, “Hong Kong writers resort to poetry amid protests to express the inexpressible.”87 Andrea Lingenfelter goes into greater depth in her feature on Tammy Ho’s 2019 protest poetry in the Los Angeles Review of Books blog.88 Ho, associate professor at Hong Kong Baptist University, is the founding co-editor of Cha: An Asian Literary Journal as well as the current president of PEN Hong Kong, and she is clearly the strongest poetic voice to have emerged as a result of the anti-ELAB movement.89

c. Anti-ELAB celebrities

Denise Ho, mentioned above, appears in global media as the most visible and vocal Hong Kong celebrity involved in the 2019 protest movement. Needless to say, she suffers professionally as a result,
enduring online opprobrium as well as outright performance bans. Since the beginning of the anti-ELAB movement, Ho has addressed the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, the Oslo Freedom Forum in Taipei, the United States’ Congressional-Executive Commission on China (CECC) in Washington DC, Singularity University’s Global Summit in San Francisco, as well as speaking to the press in Sydney, Australia. However, the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne, Australia, refused to host her conversation with Badiucao and other panelists, “Be Water: Hong Kong vs China,” allegedly because of pressure from the PRC.

Other female stars have expressed their views more cautiously, including actresses Miriam Yeung and Charmaine Sheh; however, they both removed posts from social media that tacitly supported the protesters, and Sheh went so far as to apologize for her supposedly poor judgment.

d. Pro-Beijing celebrities

In an article entitled, “Stars, luxury brands and China’s perilous patriotic tightrope,” journalists Laurie Chen and Phoebe Zhang mention female celebrities from Hong Kong, Taiwan, the PRC, and the diaspora caught in the political maelstrom. Several models, actresses, singers, and other female celebrities have expressed their ardent support for the PRC, condemned the anti-ELAB demonstrators, questioned the intent behind “mistakes” that imply Hong Kong may be a “country,” and/or voiced approval for the Hong Kong police’s conduct during the 2019 protests. Yang Mi, Shu Qi, Nana Ouyang, Angelababy, Liu Wen, and Jelly Lin Yun have all made statements expressing these sentiments with more or less enthusiasm. Rapper Vava even incorporates her views into her music.

i. Liu Yifei and the Mulan boycott

Liu Yifei, cast as the titular heroine in Disney’s live-action remake of its animated Mulan (directed by Niki Caro), attracted the ire of many netizens when she posted a statement in support of Hong Kong police actions against the protesters. Referencing an incident in which demonstrators briefly held a mainland Chinese man, Fu Guohao, at the airport suspecting him of being a “spy” pretending to be a tourist or a journalist, Liu reposted his defiant statement, "I support the Hong Kong Police. You can beat me up now....what a shame for Hong Kong." A US citizen born in Wuhan, China, Liu graduated from the Performance Institute of the Beijing Film Academy, and she has stronger professional ties to the film industry in the PRC than to America. Swift backlash followed her public support for Hong Kong police actions against the anti-ELAB demonstrators, and a call for a Mulan boycott ensued. Liu remains unapologetic and posted the following retort on Weibo: “If you are not like-minded, then leave.” The trade publication Variety reported a flood of Internet activity opposed to the boycott that led several platforms to shutdown PRC-backed accounts.

The East Asian dynamics of the boycott point to the importance of transnational female celebrity culture within regional politics. Liu starred in a Korean-mainland Chinese coproduction, The Third Way of Love (2015), with South Korean actor Song Seung-heon, and the two became romantically involved. Although they broke up, Korean fans still follow Liu’s career with interest, and they openly express outrage with Liu’s political views online:

"She is enjoying freedom as an American citizen, while forcing Hong Kong people to make sacrifices… I will not watch any of her works in the future."

Another wrote: "I don’t want to see a movie starring the person who supports a police crackdown in Hong Kong."
Given Korea’s history of student movements dating back to the March 1, 1919, revolt against Japanese colonial rule and South Korea’s June 1987 bloody student protests, the sympathy for Hong Kong’s struggles for democracy make sense. The pushback against the soft power coproduction dynamics represented by Liu’s passage from China and South Korea to Hollywood indicates that female celebrities may not be as “flexible” in crossing cultural borders as the global film industry might hope.

ii. Girl fans online

In an article entitled, “China’s Fan-Girl Culture Is Mobilizing Against the Hong Kong Protests,” Zhou Youyou describes a trending hashtag #The fan girls’ crusade# (#饭圈出征#) supported by the Communist League on Internet platforms. Posts include images of cartoon girls with red hardhats and rabbit years posed as “keyboard warriors” with captions that read: “Protect our best China. Fan girls will fight against the Hong Kong protesters.”

5. Female sexuality in question

a. Fanny Law’s “free sex” allegations

On September 9, Executive Councillor Fanny Law appeared on RTHK’s “Backchat” and claimed in response to rumours that girls were providing sex as “comfort” to male demonstrators: "I think we have confirmed that this is a true case. I am so sad for these young girls who have been misled into offering free sex.” Not only does the remark belittle female agency and reduce young women’s participation in the movement to sex and instrumentalises their role as being only in service of furthering the efforts of men fighting on the frontlines (completely rendering invisible the female frontline protesters), it also minimizes the historical plight of Korean and Taiwanese “comfort women,” who worked as sex slaves under Japanese military rule in the 20th Century. Avery Ng of the League of Social Democrats, appearing on the same radio show, stood up for Hong Kong’s young women by saying sex should be “free” and given out of love. Even Carrie Lam warned against believing “fake news” as she attempted to conduct damage control after media condemnation of Law’s unsubstantiated remark.

b. Shame and intimidation

Sex worker representatives have produced a public statement condemning a demonstration in Tuen Mun held on July 6 against mainland women who dance in public. In “Towards a Radical Hong Kong Imagination: New Forms and Content in the Movement for Self-Determination,” a blogger named Chris Chien also condemns the xenophobic and sexist nature of this demonstration against the mainly middle-aged “dancing aunties” as emblematic of deeper concerns about nativism within the anti-ELAB movement.

6. Women’s leadership in doubt

The ongoing 2019 saga of Hong Kong’s Extradition Bill and the anti-ELAB movement puts women’s leadership (Carrie Lam’s role as Chief Executive, in particular) into the global media spotlight. As world leaders voice their opinion about Hong Kong’s current political turmoil, women appear and, occasionally, steer the discourse. U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet, European Union's foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini, German Chancellor Angela
Merkel, Britain's former Prime Minister Theresa May, and Speaker of the US House Nancy Pelosi have all had a say. Hong Kong political figures such Anson Chan, former chief secretary of Hong Kong, and Sharon Hom, Executive Director of Human Rights in China (HRIC), who now resides in New York, also have the ear of US politicians as well as journalists’ attention. Tsai Ing-Wen, the President of the Republic of China on Taiwan, has voiced her support for the protesters as well, although she has stopped short of granting political asylum without restriction to them.

Carrie Lam and Tsai Ing-wen highlight a leadership model somewhat different from other powerful female heads of state in Asia. Unlike Benazir Bhutto, Corazon Aquino, Aung San Suu Kyi, Indira Gandhi, Park Geun-hye, and a few others, Lam and Tsai are not daughters or wives of powerful Asia political figures. Lam came up under British colonial rule making the transition to Chinese sovereignty in 1997 in Hong Kong and Tsai saw Taiwan’s transformation from martial law and KMT rule to the ascendancy of her own party, the DPP, in the 21st Century. Born only a few months apart (Lam in 1957 and Tsai in 1956), they both spent time studying outside of Asia, served in the government bureaucracy in various roles, went into politics, and ended up at the top in territories overshadowed by the rise of the PRC as an economic and political force.

However, Tsai and Lam differ in several important respects. Tsai must ultimately answer to voters in Taiwan, while Lam, who won the confidence of 777 out of a little under 1200 members of an election committee, does not have to worry about winning her seat as a result of a popular election based on one-person/one-vote. To date, universal suffrage remains an issue, and Lam’s authority comes into question at the intersection between gender bias and lack of political legitimacy. Ultimately, Lam serves at the pleasure of the rulers in Beijing, and protesters in the street as well as in Hong Kong’s pan-democratic opposition know this very well. Posters of Lam playing Piglet to Xi Jinping’s Pooh Bear lampoon the relationship. However, Lam’s comment that she would resign if she had the choice also casts doubt on her ability to head Hong Kong’s government without interference. She denied offering to resign, but the limitations placed on her ability to serve in an executive capacity remain. Even though she has “killed” the bill, doubts about her ability to govern linger. After 100 days in the streets, Hong Kong anti-ELAB protests continue, and the end has yet to come into view.
Taking a feminist approach to Hong Kong’s 2019 Anti-ELAB protests shines a light on the need for gender studies researchers to probe women’s role in the political sphere. Feminist scholars in law, international relations, area studies, criminology, social work, ethnography, psychology, public health, science, economics, labor relations, history, philosophy, media/journalism, popular culture, fan studies, digital technologies, visual art, literature, rhetoric, LGBTQ/sexuality, race, class, migration, education, leadership, and, of course, political science need to accept this challenge and grapple with the difficult task of understanding how feminism can “perfect a democracy” in the HKSAR.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: I thank my wonderful WSRC colleagues Petula Ho, Puja Kapai and Staci Ford as well as CGED member Alexandra Cook for helpful conversations that have contributed to this essay.

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for women to get any justice for violent crimes against them no matter where they are harmed; 7) the victim’s youth is also a factor with young women being particularly vulnerable in situations like this.

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Gina Marchetti has written extensively on Hong Kong gender politics and cinema. The following publications may be of interest:


