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Memory Translation and Minor Transnationalism

1 Introduction

On 23 August 2019, the protesters in Hong Kong gathered along the main subway lines of the city to form what they called the Hong Kong Way – the almost 50 km long human chain against the growing influence of China on Hong Kong. This event was one in the series of protests intensifying since March of that year. They were directed against the proposed extradition law and harkened back to the Umbrella movement for universal suffrage in 2014. The name and the date of the 23 August event clearly referred to another human chain – the Baltic Way – which people in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania formed thirty years earlier on 23 August 1989, as part of the liberation movement from the non-democratic regime of the Soviet Union.

When Baltic news media reported on the references made by the Hong Kong protesters to the Baltic Way, many locals were surprised that people in a faraway country outside Europe knew about their history and modeled their own political protest on it. The borrowing of this specific form of public protest and the mobilization of the transnational memory of its earlier occurrence(s) offers rich material for understanding the 'genre memory' of social rituals that are simultaneously commemorative practices and public protests. But the case also sheds light on the work of cultural translation that is involved in this process of borrowing and rehearsal.[1] In this contribution, I will draw on Ann Rigney's idea of scarcity of memorial forms and on her work on the memories of hope to explore how hopeful models of political protest and peaceful transformation travel transnationally and are translated so that they contribute to social transformation in the place of destination, but also reorient the (future) memory of the protests in the place of departure.

1 On the cultural translation of memories, see Laanes 2021; Radstone and Wilson 2021.

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One of the most fruitful ideas in memory studies in the past two decades has been Rigney's idea of scarcity of memorial forms and templates to articulate historical experiences and their memory (Rigney 2005; see also Laanes and Meretoja 2021). Borrowing from Foucault, Rigney (2005, 21–24) shows that because of the scarcity of these forms, they are often borrowed transnationally and recycled to articulate and remember historical experiences that can be quite different in terms of historical time, location, and the nature of struggles.[2] In relation to commemorative practices as social rituals, in particular, Jeffrey Olick has argued that they are path-dependent, i.e. draw on the 'genre memory' of earlier commemorative practices, and hence depend not only "on the relationship between past and present, but on the accumulation of previous such relationships and their ongoing constitution and reconstitution" (Olick 1999, 382). Another pathbreaking idea in recent years in memory studies has been Rigney's (2018a) call for more serious attention to memories of hope and to memoires of political protests that next to those aiming at atoning past suffering turn our attention to potential hopeful political developments in the future.

2 From Baltic Way to Hong Kong Way: human chain as a form of protest and memory

The Baltic Way has become a symbol of peaceful political protest for democratic state order both in local as well as in the transnational memory of the change of political regimes in Central and Eastern Europe in the 1990s.[3] Although only one of the protest events in the longer process of significant social mobilization that ultimately led to the independence of three Baltic states in 1991, the Baltic Way has had a special place in the post-socialist memory of the transformation because of the large-scale grassroots participation: two of the eight million Baltic people took to busses and private cars across all three countries to drive to the route of the Baltic Way and to stand in the 600 km long human chain for several hours. The demonstration was organized on 23 August 1989, on the 50th anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, the secret

2 Rigney states that "models of remembrance, like Foucault's utterances, are repeated, transformed and appropriated in new situations with the help of 'mobile' media. This means that one act of remembrance can stimulate comparable acts in other situations and within different social frameworks." (Rigney 2005, 23)

3 On the organizational aspects of Baltic Way, see Christie 2015; on the 20th anniversary of Baltic Way in Latvia, see Eglitis and Ardava 2012.

protocols of which partitioned Central and Eastern Europe between them, relegated Baltic states to the sphere of influence of Soviet Union and paved the way for their annexation in June 1940.[4] So the human chain commemorated a negative past of illegal annexation and loss of independent statehood. But first and foremost, it was a future-oriented protest towards liberation from a non-democratic regime. It is precisely this aspect of large-scale mobilization in the symbolic form of a human chain as a social ritual of political protest and commemoration that was borrowed and translated into the 2019 protests in Hong Kong.

When protesters in Hong Kong picked up the call for a human chain proposed in the Hong Kong forum website LIHKG by an anonymous Hong Kong person based in Estonia, they were drawing on what they understood, despite all historical differences, as the structurally similar positions of Hong Kong and the Baltic states in their relationship to China and Soviet Union respectively. Just as people in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania were mobilizing for a free society and for greater autonomy from the Soviet Union in 1989, the Hong Kong protesters have been fighting for universal suffrage and the preservation of human rights throughout the past decade in the contexts of growing control of China after the handover of Hong Kong by the UK in 1997. The call for the Hong Kong Way posted to the LIHKG forum[5] made reference to the Baltic "fight for freedom," to its strong show of a "united stance to the world" and to what the authors of the post understood as the international recognition of the 1989 event though the establishment of 23 August as "a European-wide day to commemorate the victims of totalitarian and authoritarian regimes" in the European Union. Their aim was "to imitate the successful and rational struggle" and "to become a viral video in foreign media."[6]

It is striking how there is something about the content of the form, the 'genre memory' of the human chain as a specific form of protest and memory – the content that this form has acquired over its many reiterative occurrences in different contexts of which the Baltic Way was obviously not the first – that makes it best

4 One of the leaders of Estonian Popular Front and the organizers of the Baltic Way in Estonia, Marju Lauristin has explained that the idea for the Baltic Way was born to pressure the Congress of People's Deputies of the Soviet Union founded by Gorbachev in 1989 to recognize the secret protocols of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact put on the agenda in the first meeting of the congress in May and June 1989. Personal communication, 15 December 2023.

5 https://lihkg.com/thread/1486119/page/1. (Accessed 04 December 2023).

6 The call for the Hong Kong Way rehearses all three guiding principles of the Baltic Way: people's united choice; disciplined self-organization as the basis for democracy; demonstrative nonviolence. Lauristin, who was responsible for the communication of the Baltic Way on the side of Estonian Popular Front, explained that their main aim was to reach the Western media threshold and that the form of the human chain was chosen for that purpose. Personal communication, 15 December 2023.

equipped to manifest unity and non-violent struggle and to search for wide international recognition of the cause at hand.[7] To the extent that a large-scale embodied participation and disciplined self-organization is needed to form a human chain and that it is often accompanied by powerful cultural symbolism of songs, slogans, and gestures, it results in a uniting emotional experience for the participants and becomes an impressive show for those who witness it vicariously through the media. These culturally symbolic embodied forms of protest continue to give hope even in the light of recent news of the bounty offered for the Hong Kong protesters residing in Western countries (Ng 2023).

There are many interesting similarities and differences between these two events. Suffice to mention the loosely networked nature of the organizers and participants that drew on the means of communication available at the time – phone and radio in 1989, internet forums and real-time social media channels in 2019 – to organize the events in an extremely short timespan; and the rapidly evolving identity of the protesters and their demands. The Hong Kong protests started in 2014 with the demand for universal suffrage and reignited in 2019 with a campaign against the extradition law. Since the escalation of police violence and the repression of the movement, many protesters have started to demand Hong Kong independence as "the only way out."[8] Similarly, the popular movements in the Baltic states started with the demand for the recognition of historical injustice and the greater political and economic autonomy within Soviet Union. In 1989, at the time of the Baltic Way, only a few dared to dream of independent statehood, which retrospectively has come to define the nature and meaning of the popular movements.

3 Minor transnationalism and reorienting translation

But what are the more general conceptual lessons we can learn from the travel and translation of cultural forms of public protest and memory between the Baltic states in 1989 and Hong Kong in 2019? Firstly, a lot of work on multidirectional transnational encounters of different histories has highlighted the role of majori-

7 For the understanding of the content of form in history writing, see Hayden White's ideas about the influence of different plot structures on the nintenteenth-century history writing (White 1973).

8 On the evolving sense of community imagined through artworks and artefacts in 2019 Hong Kong, see Ismangil and Schneider 2023.

tarian memory or more established memorial discourses in offering support for the emergence of minoritarian or silences memories (Rothberg 2009; De Cesari and Rigney 2014). But the afterlife of the Baltic Way in 2019 Hong Kong is a striking example of what Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih have called minor transnationalism, the travel of memories through the "minor-to-minor networks that circumvent the major" (Lionnet and Shih 2005, 8). Instead of focusing of the vertical relationship with the major and the minor memory cultures, the concept of minor transnationalism foregrounds horizontal networks of minoritized memory cultures instead.[9] The adoption of the Baltic Way in Hong Kong as an example of a horizontal networking of minor memory cultures was surprising for the Baltic people themselves. However, the vertical dynamic between the minor and the major was not entirely absent either, as the Hong Kong protesters aimed to replicate the successful international coverage of the Baltic Way in 1989 and to draw on its canonization in European memory.

Secondly, the Hong Kong cultural translation of the human chain as a form of protest highlights how the forms of protest and memory change in translation not only from the source to the target, but also how translation, a repetition with a difference, changes the 'original,' the source itself, i.e., the understanding and memory of the Baltic Way in its place of 'origin.' To highlight this point, I am borrowing from translation historian Kristin Dickinson (2021) who draws attention to the omnidirectional "dis- and reorienting" potential of translation.[10] In studying the cultural contacts and literary translation histories, she challenges the traditional unidirectional understanding of translation, which treats translations as secondary to an original both by nature as well as in space and time. Instead, she advocates regarding translation as an omnidirectional interplay of language that displaces the configurations of target and source and *reorients* the original itself.[11]

Arguably, the Hong Kong Way not only tried to imitate the Baltic Way in their own way, but has also changed the way the Baltic Way is understood and remembered in the Baltic states in the current political context. In post-socialist times, the memory of the Baltic Way has been appropriated in the Baltic countries by different political forces that emerged from the initially united playing field in 1989 and has retrospectively been rewritten as a nationalist struggle for independent state-

9 On minor transnationalism in the context of memory studies, see Lo 2013. My understanding of minor transnationalism is similar to what Andreas Huyssen describes as the South-to-South axis in his recent book on memory art in Global South (2022).

10 Dickinson's use of the term 'omnidirectional' is very close to Rothberg's 'multidirectional memory.'

11 I have developed Dickinson idea of omnidirectional reorienting translation to understand the processes of transnational cultural remembering in Laanes 2024.

hood. Transnationally too, the debates around the establishment of 23 August as the European Day of Remembrance for Victims of Stalinism and Nazism in the European Parliament in 2008 pushed mostly by conservative forces from different Eastern European countries have retrospectively tainted the memory of the Baltic Way as essentially a nationalist struggle at the expense of the fight for freedom in terms of the rule of law and democratic values. The Hong Kong Way, in the way in which it translated the Baltic Way into its own struggles, has reminded the Baltic people that their mobilization thirty years earlier was not only about national independence, but about achieving a free society and liberal values of democracy and human rights. It has also highlighted the value of the Baltic Way as a symbol of a peaceful social and political transformation. These are two very important reminders for the people in the Baltic states, in Europe and in the rest of the world in the context of Russian war of aggression in Ukraine in which the Ukrainian effort to defend the country is framed by the aggressor as a nationalist endeavor, instead of a civic one; an attempt to avoid falling prey to an authoritarian regime without the rule of law, a free press, and freedom of speech.