

Youth Activism Heats Up

by Beverly Yau and Jennifer Kwok



A drum beats solemnly and steadily as a silent line of people walks barefoot along the streets of Hong Kong. With every 26, deliberate steps, they kneel down and prostrate themselves on the road. In their cupped hands, each person holds some rice and seeds. The leaders wear green vests with the words “anti-Express Rail Link” on the front and “stop the funding” at the back.

This blend of protest and theatre, which electrified the media at the time, was organised by a group of activists labelled as the post-80s generation. Their new means of conveying the message have gained much attention after their active protests against the construction of the Express Rail Link to Guangzhou.

The 26 steps are a reference to the length of the Hong Kong section of the railway - 26 km. The rice and seeds represent the precious resources left in Hong Kong for the sustainability they wish to protect. One of the main organisers, 28-year-old Leung Wing-lai says the purpose of the trek was to show people that the fast pace of the city needs to slow down.

Apart from the trek, Leung was also one of the six young activists who went on a 120-hour hunger strike outside the Legislative Council to support the anti-Express Rail Link movement.

Leung says the hunger strike was inspired by how animals stop eating when they are sick, in order to “tune” their bodies. The activists were making a statement that society is ill and the hunger strike was their effort to heal society.

Another innovative concept the activists used in the protest was to have a party mindset to generate awareness. Carnivals were held with movie screenings and forums that allowed interaction and discussion. The banners and posters were created in a humorous manner. Music was also commonly



Musical instruments are common during the anti-Express Rail Link protests.

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used to emphasise the party mood that was created during the protests. Young activists played the guitar and drums whilst some sang and danced.

“These (social issues) are already unhappy matters, so we like to use a light-hearted manner to express it,” says 20-year-old Phoebe Wu Po-yee.

These young activists also raised public awareness through timely and popular topics and events. For example, the group of activists tried to raise awareness of the plight of Tsoi Yuen Village through the movie *Avatar*. The Hollywood blockbuster is a tale about a fictional tribe on another planet, called the Na’vi and their fight to protect their land from invading humans. Tsoi Yuen Village is to be demolished as it stands in the path of the railway.

As Wu and her fellow young activists left the cinema, they shouted out lines from the film: “They’ve sent us a message that they can take whatever they want. But we will send them a message that this is our land.” Their aim was to tell the audience that what was happening on the screen was the same as what was happening right here. It was the plight of Tsoi Yuen Village.

The anti-Express Rail Link demonstrations highlighted the increase in the participation of young activists. Although the activists failed to stop the construction of the railway, they demonstrated their success in generating awareness among the public. One major factor that contributed to that triumph was the use of the internet

in raising awareness, especially among the young.

Discussions and groups were set up on the social networking website Facebook which attracted many to join as fans. Group pages posted the most up-to-date events and activities and allowed fans to invite their friends to join the group. The constant update of information on users’ “feeds” through their friends’ activities resulted in an expanded online network that allowed others to learn of the related issues and activities.

“Facebook is the best way to contact people as it can connect with many people at once,” 18-year-old Yu Yat-sum explains. Yu herself has become aware of various social issues through Facebook. She learnt about the plight of Tsoi Yuen Village and the express rail link through discussions with her friends there. She also used the website to appeal to her friends to take part in the protests. In December 2009, Yu participated in a rally at the Lo Wu border crossing, which was also mobilised through Facebook.



An activist holding rice in his hands, representing the precious resources left in Hong Kong that he wishes to protect.

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Young activists prostrate themselves after 26 steps.

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“Compared to previous promotional methods that expressed their aim through words, we used more pictures, communicated through Facebook and even put stickers on the streets,” says Wu. However, despite the convenience and effectiveness of the internet, she says it is still important to go out on the streets and talk to people.

“The internet cannot cover all people, like housewives,” explains Wu.

The media has lumped together the young activists involved in the movement under the label, the post-80s generation, because most of them were born or after the 1980s. However, not all of them agree with this term, claiming it is a generalisation solely based on age.

Eric Lai Yan-ho, a second-year student from the Department of Government and Public Administration at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, disagrees with the term post-80s. He feels that within the same generation, there are different types of people with different attitudes towards the issue.

“I think it (the anti-Express Rail Link protest) is not about the generational struggle as many have proclaimed,” Lai says. “I think this is a social class problem.”

Lai explains that the anti-Express Rail Link issue was the result of the capitalist establishment in the Legislative Council using its power to suppress the livelihoods of the lower classes. Many people came out to protest because they were worried that in future, their lives could also

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be forcefully restrained by the same establishment group. Therefore, Lai believes the entire movement is a social class movement and not simply about the younger generation protesting because they are oppressed by the older generation.

Through a spate of protests in recent years, young activists have expressed their concerns over social issues that have been lurking in the background for a long time. One such issue, which garnered a great deal of attention was the Queen Pier’s protest in 2007 that demanded the government to stop its demolition. Young activists have since continuously expressed their opinions to the government through such social movements, but to no avail.

For trek organiser and hunger striker Leung Wing-lai, the government simply does not spend any time on understanding young people’s needs. Leung says the government is completely detached from the people. “It is like back in the ancient times, when the government officials stayed in the palace; they never know what the world outside is like.”

Chan Chi-shing, a social work



On the 15th and 16th January, young protesters sat outside the Legislative Council, awaiting the final decision on funding for the railway.

COURTESY OF CHU HOI-DICK

student from the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, spent the night camped outside the Legislative Council on January 15 discussing the core values of Hong Kong with fellow protesters.

“When we look around Central, we realise every single building is about money,” says Chan. He feels that Hong Kong’s core values should not be about money. Instead, people should protect their land, their people and their culture. The express rail link made him feel the government had been blindly chasing economic development. Development

should benefit the majority, but the express rail link only brings convenience to the rich, he says.

Another issue that has come up again and again during the debate over the express rail link is urban redevelopment. Phoebe Wu is particularly concerned with urban planning issues. She has

previously led cultural tours in old districts such as Kwun Tong to try to persuade the public to get to know their communities better.

“The Queen’s Pier was not a single case; many buildings have been silently demolished,” says Wu, referring to the demolition of the old pier in Central that led to fierce protests in 2007. She believes there are similarities to what is happening to Tsoi Yuen Village now. “It is only a matter of profits for the rich and the businessmen,” Wu says. For Wu, most of the redevelopment work in Hong Kong is about housing instead of creating homes. She stresses that a person’s home should include their personal network. What the government is offering by relocating those affected, is just a place for people to rest their bodies.

Despite the fact that funding the express rail link has been approved, these young activists are not disheartened. Many have promised that they will continue to fight for Tsoi Yuen Village, while others are planning to join other social movements that will take place. What exactly do these young people want? Chan Chi-shing’s answer is simple: “We just want the government to stop and listen.”



Six young protesters, including Leung Wing-lai (4th from the left) and Phoebe Wu Po-yee (1st from the right), started a 120-hour hunger strike outside the Legislative Council to support the anti-Express Rail Link movement.

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