

*Ming-sho Ho\**

## COMMENT: WHY WAS THE SUNFLOWER MOVEMENT SUCCESSFUL?

The 2014 Sunflower Movement amounted to a critical turning point in Taiwan's political development, and the continuing reverberations were still evident even five years later. Two instances in July 2019 suffice to testify to its enduring legacy. On July 1, 2019, to resist an extradition bill that would allow suspects in Hong Kong to be sent for the trial at the Chinese judiciary, young protesters stormed the Legislative Council. Among the protest slogans they painted inside the building, "Hong Kong's Sunflower" stood out as a clear reminder of how the Taiwanese precedent was positively perceived among Hong Kong's activists. Two weeks later, Lin Fei-fan, the most recognizable Sunflower student leader, assumed the position of the Democratic Progressive Party's deputy secretary-general. The unusual personnel decision was largely seen as an effort of the ruling party to reconnect young pro-Sunflower voters in the upcoming challenge of 2020 election.

Given its historical significance, the Sunflower Movement has justifiably stimulated a number of scholarly outputs; yet so far, researchers have not engaged in critical debate or mutual criticism. Charles Wu's new article "How Public Opinion Shaped Taiwan's Sunflower Movement" is thus a welcome addition to the literature. Since Wu wrote the piece as a rejoinder to my previous article in the same journal (Ho 2015), it is a great opportunity to develop a critical dialogue in the interest of better understanding that extraordinary event. To anticipate, I disagree with Wu's main thrust that privileges public opinion as the most decisive factor in explaining the success of Sunflower Movement. I find the single-minded pursuit of a magic variable unconvincing both theoretically and empirically, and I continue to hold that the emergence of the Sunflower Movement is still best understood in terms of the combined factors of political opportunities (which include elite disunity), threat, and movement strategy.

It is well known that the intra-party struggle between Ma Ying-jeou and Wang Jin-pyng affected how the Sunflower Movement unfolded and ended. Wu contends that the so-called "elite rivalry school" (including me) erred because the disagreements between these two were insufficient in explaining responses to protesters. In particular, Wu maintains that two critical episodes of Wang's intervention—the decision not to allow police reinforcement on March 18–19 and the announcement to prioritize codification of cross-strait negotiation on April 6—were chiefly motivated by his understanding of shifting public opinion. Based on excerpts from an anonymous interviewee,

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Wu undertakes an unusual mind-reading of Wang Jin-pyng, who did not reveal his own reasoning in public until the publication of his memoir in 2019. In his own account, Wang mentioned his concerns for student safety and physical damages to the legislative building as well as a preference for a peaceful settlement (Wang 2019, 151–160); there is no passage indicating that his responses were based on the ebb and flow of public opinion. Wu's second-guessing about Wang's ulterior motives from dubious interview sources does not reconcile with Wang's own approved account.

Wu also idiosyncratically describes Wang as “an ally to the movement”—a judgment that is not shared by movement participants that I know. By exclusively focusing on Wang's behavior, the article inadvertently exaggerates the role of a politician during the political crisis. Take Wang's reaction when student protesters stormed the legislature at nine p.m. on March 18, for instance. His immediate response was to order the police to eject the intruders. An intense skirmish lasted several hours without being able to expel the barricaded protesters, and Wang then decided to call off the police action at three a.m. the next day (Ho 2015, 83; Ho 2019a, 108–109; Wang 2019, 152). The claim that Wang deliberately remained “reticent” in the first 48 hours because he was “observing the tide of public opinion” was erroneous. Wang took quick action and then revised his previous decision in that eventful night.

Wu is certainly right to highlight the unusual popularity of the Sunflower Movement, at least in the first few days, which constrained the incumbent actions. By positing public opinion as the most important variable in shaping politician behavior, Wu is forced to explain the anomaly of why Ma Ying-jeou decided to act against public opinion. True, Ma appeared less constrained by public opinion in his second presidential term, and his personal ambition to secure “a historical legacy” also mattered. However, the contrast between a “seasoned” Wang and an “ideological” Ma is an overly crude picture of these politicians that fails to describe the deep split within the ruling party. In the first week of the occupation of the legislature, Hau Lung-pin (then Taipei City mayor) and Chu Li-luan (the New Taipei City mayor) expressed conciliatory gestures toward student protesters (Ho 2015, 85; Ho 2019a, 104), whereas Wu Den-yih (then vice-president) and Jiang Yi-huah (then premier) sided with Ma in his hardliner attitude. Why were Hau and Chu reasonable political leaders on the par with Wang? And why did Wu and Jiang behave like unreconstructed ideologues who refused to listen to the people? The simple truth is that politicians were motivated by a plethora of concerns, and their political calculus typically included public opinion but was rarely exclusively decided by it.

The assumption of public opinion as an exogenous variable that explains politician behavior does not hold water because popular response itself was also in turn affected by the intervention of political actors. The lack of enthusiasm for the Cross-strait Services Trade Agreement does not automatically translate into support for the Sunflower Movement or its politicians' endorsement. The ruling party's decision to railroad the free-trade agreement by bypassing the due review process on March 17 deepened the public skepticism over the deal with China (Ho 2015, 79). Movement participants went to great lengths to present a civilized and inclusive public image to soften the disruption to public order, which helped gain citizen sympathy (Ho 2019a, 159–160). In a more recent case, intensive conservative mobilization overturned the favorable public opinion on same-sex marriage at the end of 2016, and thereby delayed progress of marriage equality (Ho 2019b). In other words, public opinion is an ever-present stake in

contentious politics, as many participants attempt to influence the citizens' hearts and minds in their favor. It is not exterior or prior to the conflict, but a mediating variable in the government–protester interaction. Therefore I see the attempt to elevate public opinion as an explanation of movement outcome as not only weakly supported in Taiwan's case, but also as a misadventure into a theoretical blind alley. A public-opinion explanation is not easily generalizable across global movement cases; neither is it a good fit into the existing conceptual vocabulary of contentious politics studies. More troublingly, one can quickly find a counterexample. A popularly supported social movement with elite allies is not necessarily a recipe for success. The 1989 Beijing student movement possessed citizen support and the endorsement of pro-reform leaders, and it ended in a tragic bloodbath.

What made the Sunflower Movement successful? Being a participant in this research debate, I found my arguments imprecisely presented in Wu's recapitulation. My article was based on a "modified polity model" that took political opportunities, threat, and movement strategy into consideration (Ho 2015, 71–76). I also traced the change in public support and how that influenced the incumbent's decisions (ibid. 86, 89). Later, I extended the explanatory framework of opportunities, threat and movement strategy to understand the origin of Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement (Ho 2019, 124–129). My position is that "elite disunity per se did not automatically favor contention, but was actually activated by movement strategy" (Ho 2015, 84). It is misleading to characterize my views as reflective of an "elite rivalry school." The Sunflower Movement was successful in its daring occupation of the national legislature due to a number of reasons, including incumbent mistakes, smart-mob tactics, and swift logistics, among others. These reasons are not reducible to a single variable, be it elite rivalry or public opinion.

*Ming-sho Ho* is professor at Department of Sociology, National Taiwan University. He researches social movements, labor, and the environmental issues. He published *Working Class Formation in Taiwan* (2014) and *Challenging Beijing's Mandate of Heaven: Taiwan's Sunflower Movement and Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement* (2019).

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