Chapter 20

Social Media, Political Mobilization, and Citizen Engagement: A Case Study of the March 18, 2014, Sunflower Student Movement in Taiwan

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ABSTRACT

On March 18, 2014, a group of student protestors raided and occupied the Legislative Yuan and later the Executive Yuan in Taiwan. The student-led movement lasted for about 3 weeks after Taiwan’s President made significant concessions to change his non-transparent practices when signing the Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement (CSSTA) with People’s Republic of China. Mostly labelled as a movement of civil disobedience against government’s dealings with China, the 318 Sunflower Student Movement is viewed as an important step toward the deepening of Taiwan’s democratization process. Its repercussions were felt in Hong-Kong and Macao where similar civil disobedience movements had emerged. On the basis of the resource mobilization theory (RMT), the authors used a combination of case study and thematic analysis methods to examine the role of social media in political mobilization in Taiwan. This chapter identified two major recurrent themes as follows: challenging mainstream media and mobilizing multi-movement resources.

INTRODUCTION

When Taiwan’s 26th Golden Melody Awards announced its annual best song of the year, Island Sunrise, the broadcast segment showing its lead singer, Wei-Chieh Huang and the banner, “Today (Demolish) Dapu, Tomorrow (Overthrow) the Government” was censored in both China and Singapore (Xu, 2015).
Huang’s banner has become a symbol of civil resistance that was ignited by the forced evictions in Dapu, Maoli County since 2013 and by the mysterious deaths of several tenants (Wang & Chung, 2013). The winning song happens to be the theme song of the now famed 318 Sunflower Student Movement in Taiwan that has reshaped the island country’s political landscape in 2014 (Chen, 2015; Chiu, 2014). Many scholars have foreseen that its repercussions are predicted to be felt in the upcoming presidential election when the opposition party’s candidate, Dr. Ing-Wen Tsai, later became Taiwan’s first female president after replacing the unpopular China-friendly President Yi-Jeou Ma (Bardenhagen, 2014; Chen, 2015; Hung & Stout, 2016; Rahaula, 2015). In the local election in 2014, the ruling Kuomintang (henceforth, KMT) only won 6 out of 22 seats in municipal majors and county magistrates (Yeh, 2014). In January 2016, Democratic Progressive Party (henceforth, DDP) candidate Dr. Ing-Wen Tsai ultimately received a majority of 56 percent of the vote (Tiezzi, 2016). The DPP has also become the first-ever majority in Taiwan’s legislative election, winning 68 out of 113 seats (Tiezzi, 2016). Observers have concluded the DPP’s victories are attributed to KMT’s failing policies to engage China by maintaining “status quo,” to favor business interests in China, and the awareness of young people after the Sunflower Student Movement (Chen, 2015; Hunt & Stout, 2016; Tiezzi, 2016; Yeh, 2014). The 318 Student Sunflower Movement has attracted scholars’ attention because it demonstrates a good example of civil disobedience movement (Lin, 2015; Masahiro, 2014). Civil disobedience movement, or civil resistance movement, has swept most parts of the world because of many social issues related to the corporate power, unemployment (particularly among the youth and less skilled workers), income inequality, wealth distribution, etc. (Penney & Dadas, 2014). Like other social movements and protests, they serve an important function in a robust democracy (Jha, 2008). The rapid increase of civil disobedience movements in Taiwan has been attributed to President Ying-Jeou Ma’s pro-business and China-friendly regime (Misahiro, 2014). Taiwanese people were taken to the streets to protest against various causes, ranging from “the widespread expropriation of land for industrial development and urban redevelopment projects, against hazing deaths of army recruits, and against nuclear power plants” (Misahiro, 2014, para 11). Small local social movement groups (such as Citizen 1985 and the Black Island Nation Youth Alliance) have risen as a result of these increasing tensions attributed to government tax and real estate policies, frictions due to closer economic ties with China, strategies and tactics when dealings with China, etc. (Cole, 2014). However, the scale and influence of the Sunflower Student Movement have been assessed to exceed other civil disobedience movements (Misahiro, 2014). The analysis of this movement further demonstrates what social media are capable of accomplishing to address the lack of resources that many social movement groups are faced with.

Compounding with the worsened social situations in Taiwan are the constant military threats from China’s rising hegemony (Kelly, 2014a). China intends to expand her sphere of influence to cover a wide area of Asia (Kelly, 2014b). From a geo-political perspective, China’s grand strategy is “prioritize land power and aim to become preponderant on the continent before it can challenge US’ command of the global commons and kick it out from its natural zone of influence” (The Policy Tensor, 2013, para 35). The hegemony of China has increasingly impacted on Taiwan’s ways of lives, which unanticipatedly leads to an increasing demand for Taiwan’s own national identity (Sui, 2014). Similarly, the rise of China was strongly felt by Hong-Kong people, and prompted its own civil disobedience movement, called “Umbrella Revolution” (Lee & Wu, 2016). Given the historical and political circumstances that Taiwan has faced in response to the rise of China, social media have served an important catalyst to the 318 Sunflower Student Movement, similar to many other recent civil disobedience movements in other parts of the world. In the Middle East and Northern