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PEPE THE FROG IS LOVE AND PEACE: HIS SECOND LIFE IN HONG KONG

CASPAR CHAN

In Hong Kong, starting in June 2019, a series of demonstrations and civil disobedience actions were launched, protesting the government's controversial proposal of the extradition law. The political situation has turned out to be tense and, to an extent, violent, where one can see police in blue and protestors in black assaulting each other; where one can see countless Molotov's cocktails and tearing gases flying in front of the backdrop of the metropolitan, where one can see an abyss gradually being formed between the authorities and the Hong Konger activists, and where one can also see how people possessing different political views have moved their battleground from physical places to online platforms amidst the pandemic. Amidst all this, one icon always remains ubiquitous: the face of Pepe the Frog. Connoted as an alt-right symbol, a figure of hatred and white nationalism, the meme of Pepe the Frog sheds these meanings and signifies something very different in the political drama in Hong Kong: love, peace and frustration towards the government. Indeed, through repeated uses in different situations, the meaning of memes also changes, which can result in a contrasting understanding of the same meme by two groups of people. Investigating the uses of the meme of Pepe the Frog in the current Hong Kong situation, I will explore how politically charged memes can be appropriated otherwise from their original contexts and significance. Memes have the affordances and the flexibility to be entextualized out of their original place and be re-contextualized by their users. In this way, a meme does not only appoint one specific way of understanding, but allows its viewers to derive and create their own ways of comprehending the meme through continually identifying with the meme itself.

The Entextualizability and Appropriability of Memes

Memes have taken on a variety of roles in online spaces. For one, their jocular aspect has been manipulated by users to refer to or mimic other contents on various social media¹, and by the same token, memes that parody public and political figures have also appeared, in turn giving rise to political memes.² Pepe the Frog is such a meme, whose prominence on

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- 1 Laura Glitsos and James Hall, "The Pepe the Frog Meme: An Examination of Social, Political, and Cultural Implications Through the Tradition of the Darwinian Absurd," *Journal for Cultural Research* 23, no. 4. (2019): 381–395; Limor Shifman, "An Anatomy of a Youtube Meme," *New Media and Society* 14, no. 2 (2012): 187 – 203; and Heidi E. Huntington, "Subversive Memes: Internet Memes as a Form of Visual Rhetoric," *AoIR Selected Papers of Internet Research* (2013).
 - 2 Anushka Kulkarni, "Internet Meme and Political Discourse: A study on the Impact of Internet Meme as a Tool in Communicating Political Satire," *Journal of Content, Community & Communication Amity School of Communication* 6 (2017): 13; and Giseline Kuipers, "'Where Was King Kong When We Needed Him?' Public Discourse, Digital Disaster Jokes, and the Functions of Laughter After

online social platforms has allowed him to be a representative of political memes of many sorts. His adoption by the American far-right as a symbol of 'white nationalism, neo-Nazism and anti-immigration',³ his relation with Trump,⁴ as well as his personification of the ideology of 'embrace your loserdom' as articulated by Dale Beran,⁵ has earned this frog-looking caricature his own political dimension and connotation.

If we understand a meme as a sign, then as with understandings of signs in general, we understand memes contextually. In other words, if a meme enters a context different from its original one, its reading can be different, and thus the viewers can also understand it otherwise. Being able to be contextualized in one situation implies that a sign can also be *entextualized* from that context and *recontextualized* in another. By entextualization, Piia Varis and Jan Blommaert mean that a sign can be extracted from its original context and re-inserted into another 'involving different participation frameworks', which allow 'different meaning outcomes.'⁶ Richard Bauman and Charles Briggs also express that entextualisation as a process 'of making a stretch of our linguistic and/or semiotic...production into a unit - a text - that can be lifted out of its interactional setting'⁷ Content from social media have a high possibility to be entextualisable.⁸ Through numerous clicks of transmitting and copy and-pasting a meme, its formal features can eventually be levered from their original context. Now that a meme, being entextualised, floats from its original niche, it opens up the possibility to be perceived in a different way. Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear rightly point out that while a meme is circulated on social media, its content can never be 'intact'⁹. The more exposure a meme gains with its viewers, the more versatile the meme becomes. Throughout the meme's dissemination, new understandings and 'idiosyncratic spins', can be accrued according to its viewers' own referential background. In other words, after being extracted its original context, a meme can also be 'remixed' with new

9/11," *The Journal of American Culture* 28, no. 1 (2005): 80.

- 3 Glitsos and James, "The Pepe the Frog Meme," 285, citing from "Pepe Cartoonist Kills off Character That Became Hate symbol," *Australian Broadcasting Corporation*, May 9, 2017 retrieved from <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-05-09/pepe-cartoonist-kills-off-character-that-became-hate-symbol/8509280>.
- 4 Know Your Meme, "Pepe the Frog - Pepe Timeline," last updated 2015. <https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/942029-pepe-the-frog>; Glitsos and James, "The Pepe the Frog Meme: An Examination of Social, Political, and Cultural Implications through the Tradition of the Darwinian Absurd," 284.
- 5 Dale Beran, "4chan: The Skeleton Key to the Rise of Trump," *Medium*, February 14, 2017, <https://medium.com/@DaleBeran/4chan-the-skeleton-key-to-the-rise-of-trump-624e7cb798cb>.
- 6 Piia Varis, and Jan Blommaert, "Conviviality and Collectives on Social Media: Virality, Memes, And New Social Structures," *Multilingual Margins: A Journal of Multilingualism from the Periphery* 2, no. 1 (2015): 36.
- 7 Richard Bauman and Charles L. Briggs, "Poetics and Performance as Critical Perspectives on Language and Social Life," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 19 (1990): 73.
- 8 Irene Theodoropoulou, "Mediatized Vernacularization: On the Structure, Entextualization and Resemiotization of Varoufakiology," *Discourse, Context & Media* 14 (2016): 28–39.
- 9 Colin Lankshear and Michele Knobel, *New Literacies: Everyday Practices and Classroom Learning*, 2nd ed. (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2006,) 208.

elements in the new context, and appropriated by its new viewers. This entails the shedding of a meme's original connotation, regardless of whether the new appropriator of the meme knows of this original connotation or not, and the acquisition of new significance in its new situation.

So, a meme's ability to be entextualised from its original context entails the possibility of its subsequently being appropriated in another. But I suspect that there remains one more step before an entextualised meme can be perceived and used otherwise by its new appropriators. In other words, simply being taken away from the meme's original context does not and necessarily mean that a new meaning is automatically assigned once it enters the new context. For a new meaning to emerge, an identification by the new appropriators must identify with the meme. In the case of a political movement where the situation is dynamic, such as that in Hong Kong, a continuous, negotiable identification can arise.

Left or Right? – The Political Case in Hong Kong

To understand how the meme can be laden with a different political charge in Hong Kong, it is useful to first look at the political context in Hong Kong. The current political turmoil started with the disputed proposal of the 'extradition bill' by the Hong Kong government in early 2019. On June 9, about one million Hong Kongers flooded the streets to protest this proposal. Hoping for an agreeable response from their government, the Hong Kongers instead received a reply from the authorities stating that the bill had already been widely consulted and discussed, and thus the government would proceed to the legislation of this bill anyway. Frustrated, agitated, and disappointed, Hong Kongers began a series of protests, rallies and activist actions to counteract the government's proposal. This wave of political action has thus received the name 'The Anti-Extradition Movement'.

Gradually, alongside the opposition against the government's proposal, other political demands were also voiced. Five demands have emerged from the protestors: as one of the movement's slogans goes: 'Five Demands, No[t] One Less!' (五大訴求 缺一不可). The five demands are: 1) withdrawal of the Extradition Law; 2) retraction of the proclamation that the protests are 'riots'; 3) withdrawal of criminal charges against all protestors; 4) establishment of an independent committee to investigate the abuse of power by the police; and 5) implementation of dual universal suffrage. With the government as the common enemy, the movement's anti-establishment, anti-oppressive character also implies its motivation in dethroning the current ruling atmosphere in Hong Kong. This facet of the movement echoes some of the ideologies of left-wing politics in the Western sense. What marks the movement's difference from traditional left-wing politics, however, is that the movement is not based on the yearning to fight against class inequality. It did not start as a struggle to combat economic discrimination. Instead, the Anti-Extradition Movement began with a wish to intervene in the process of law-making. However large the social movement has become in its later stages, it has always and mainly aimed at attempting to reform the governmental system. 'Democracy'

and ‘freedom’ are the two keywords resonating through the whole movement, but rarely are there people who would think that ‘improving the wealth gap or ‘refining social welfare’ should occupy a primary place in this movement.

Nonetheless, the movement quickly shifted towards a ‘nationalistic’ approach. More aggressive actions were also performed. For instance, seeing both the Hong Kong government and Chinese central government as the enemy, the protestors initiated a wave of boycotts of Chinese products and stores, as well as those businesses who advocated support to the government. From July 2019, protestors began to sort all businesses into one of four color-coded categories, each designating an action to be taken: 1) ‘Renovate the Black’: those stores and shops run by the mainland Chinese, politicians from the pro establishment parties and the government were to be destroyed and dismantled; 2) ‘Decorate the Red’: the walls and facades of the shops established by or related to Chinese businesses were to be graffitied and pasted with activist posters; 3) ‘Boycott the Blue’: businesses who showed support for the government were to be boycotted; and 4) ‘Visit the Yellow’: local, indigenous shops run by Hong Kongers and who supported the movement were welcomed by the protestors and were to be visited. The protestors also focused more on finding what constitutes a ‘real’ Hong Konger, suspecting any non-movement-supporting business or person. With the above purist ideals in the protestors’ minds, there even existed a brief moment of ‘witch-hunting’, where the Hong Kongers competed to be more passionate about the movement and more resistant to anything not Hong Kong-related. Such purist action is termed 鬥黃, ‘to compete to be more yellow’, where the color yellow is the symbol of this movement. While one store could be boycotted and destroyed because it was not ‘yellow enough’, some protestors became more radical and extreme, criticising and alienating other fellow protestors.



Fig. 1: A poster circulated on LIGHK, a popular Hong Kong forum, which illustrate the four categories as well s what to act accordingly. Screen captured from <https://lihkg.com/thread/1626988/page/1>.

One could also attack another protestor as being a “leftard (左膠), who sought a universal struggle and focused on non-violent ways to continue to act. ‘Leftard’ is an interesting term,

and it first appeared in the public discourse in around 2014 when the Umbrella Movement arose, sparked by the intervention of the National People's Congress Standing Committee, who implemented a restrictive election framework for both Chief Executive and the Legislative Council. At the beginning of that movement, calmer ways and principles for counteracting the police and the government gained support from many Hong Kongers, and could be summarised as 'Peaceful, Reasonable, Non-violent' (和理非). But as the Umbrella Movement proceeded, many protestors started to think that because the actions carried out by the authorities and the police were considered brutal, non-violent actions should be replaced by those more aggressive so as to show their stance more firmly. From this point, those who still believed that the movement could continue in a peaceful manner were name-tagged as 'bleeding-heart liberals' (大愛撻), which is literally translated as 'big-love dickheads'. This group of people were further seen as leftists, who, in the eyes of Hong Kongers, are essentialized as communists and have also been called 'leftards'. Though the Umbrella Movement was halted about eleven weeks after its start, this term, as well as the militaristic approach to counteracting authority, have lasted beyond this point. As a result, five years later in the Anti-Extradition Movement, one could be called a 'leftard' if one was not 'brave and military' enough. This is a translation of 勇武, a term which is used to refer to those protestors who fought directly against the police, and contains the idea that their violence is justified because the authorities first used violence against them. It is also because of this that, generally speaking, no Hong Kongers see this movement as a leftist movement.

Amidst the pandemic, and after the imposition of the National Security Law on 1 July 2020, Hong Kongers now have other agendas in continuing the movement. They have also revised their strategies for counteracting the authorities. The 'witch-hunt' was halted, milder ways were adopted, and the battleground has been moved online. Nonetheless, the notions of 'yellow' and 'leftard' still occupy a place in everyday discourse. In any case, through all these changes, one can see that it is hard to categorize the movement into a specific place on the political spectrum: one can say that it reflects a certain degree of nationalism and populism, but one should also not overlook the anti-establishment bent and universal goals the Hong Kongers collectively seek. Neither can the movement be interpreted as politically 'central and neutral', at least in the Hong Kongers' sense, who have adopted the view that 'one should never be central and neutral before great issues'.¹⁰ In short, the political movement in Hong Kong reflects a certain ambiguity and intuitiveness in characterizing its political orientation. On the other hand, it can be argued that, to some extent, the mainstream way of perceiving left/right politics could not fully be applied to the case of Hong Kong. Be that as it may, it is this ambivalent and dynamic atmosphere that gives birth to a Hong Kong where a new framework and way of seeing things awaits. It also provides a ground where, as Varis and

10 Naam Ngon Geoi Sii [南岸居士], "'Zhongli' De Yuanzui 「中立」的原罪," [The Sin of Neutrality] *Standnews*, February 29, 2020. <https://www.thestandnews.com/politics/%E4%B8%AD%E7%AB%8B-%E7%9A%84%E5%8E%9F%E7%BD%AA>, and "點樣同啲中立撻對話? How to Talk With Neutral Retard?" *LIHKG*, last modified August 12, 2019, <https://lihkg.com/thread/1459016/page/1>.

Blommaert write, a new understanding of pre-existing signs and symbols can be produced.¹¹ Within difficult-to-define political background, Pepe the Frog, well-known as a symbol of hatred, can receive his second life in Hong Kong.

Pepe the ‘Hong Konger’ — A Symbol of Love, Sympathy and Trolling

Being fans of Trump’s presidency and shit-stirring online campaigns, as well as the exaggeration and bragging of his anti-China stance, the Hong Kong protestors must have been familiar with the relation between Trump and Pepe the Frog. Yet not many were aware of the relation between the infamous meme and the alt-right, nor the meme’s trolling, self-deprecating character¹². Instead, the sad-looking amphibian-humanoid is seen as a symbol of resistance, even one of love and peace, by the protestors in the Anti-Extradition Movement. ‘To me, Pepe is just a Hello Kitty-like character,’ said a protestor in Daniel Victor’s NYT report. ‘It just looks funny and captures the hearts of so many youngsters,’ said a user of LIHKG, a popular forum in Hong Kong.¹³ Pepe, shedding its alt-right connotation, is seen as an uplifting, youthful comrade who accompanies Hong Kongers amidst the political struggle.¹⁴

The protestors embrace Pepe not as a loser or as a means to ignite hatred, but as a persona the protestors feel related to, and one that possesses the qualities being projected onto him by the protestors. For instance, ‘Pepe the Press’, one wearing a helmet with the word ‘Press’, holding a phone and wearing a vest, represents the press, the journalists and reporters who work—even volunteer—in this movement, symbolizing free press and a wish for justice to be upheld towards the protestors. Another ‘Pepe the Protestor’, wearing a black shirt and a yellow helmet (the attire of a protestor), lets out a cheer with fists held in front of his chest. He too could be seen as an encouraging being who offers comfort and solidarity to the protestors. To be sure, Hong Kongers have created different artefacts with Pepe’s image and placed them everywhere, in a sense that the more they project themselves and their values onto Pepe, the more they ‘materialise’ them on Pepe to the extent that their ‘Pepe self’ accompany them everywhere. Pepe could be seen on walls and façades in common places like tunnels, bridges, flyovers, and shopping malls all around Hong Kong.

11 Varis, and Blommaert, “Conviviality and Collectives on Social Media,” 36.

12 Victor, Daniel. “Hong Kong Protesters Love Pepe the Frog. No, They’re Not Alt-Right,” *The New York Times*. August 19, 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/19/world/asia/hong-kong-protest-pepe-frog.html>.

13 Victor, “Hong Kong Protesters,” 2019

14 Christina Ko, “How Pepe the Frog became face of Hong Kong protests – despite cartoon being a symbol of 15 hate in US,” *South China Morning Post*, August 17, 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/arts-culture/article/3023060/how-pepe-frog-became-face-hong-kong-protests-despite-cartoon>; and Gina Echevarria, “How This Frog Meme Became a Symbol of Hope and Hate,” *Insider*, October 8, 2020, <https://www.businessinsider.com/pepe-frog-meme-hate-symbol-hope-hong-kong-protesters-2019-10?r=DE&IR=T>.

Pepe is ubiquitous, as if Pepe had become a fellow Hong Konger, so special as a symbol of the movement, but also familiar: a consolation a Hong Konger can always count on.



Fig. 2: 'Pepe the Press' graffitied by the Hong Kong protesters. Screen captured from Daniel Victor, 'Hong Kong Protesters Love Pepe the Frog. No, They're Not Alt-Right,' *The New York Times*, August 19, 2019, retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/19/world/asia/hong-kong-protest-pepe-frog.html>.



Fig. 3: A flag showing a cheering Pepe. Photo from: © Getty Images. Anadolu Agency. Miguel Candela. Screen captured from Igor Ogorodnev, 'What the Uncanceling of Pepe the Frog – Just for HK Protesters. Though – Tells Us about US Media,' *RT Question More*, September 21, 2019, retrieved from <https://www.rt.com/op-ed/469318-pepe-frog-hong-king-media/>.



Fig. 4: A graffiti of Pepe wearing the protestor's helmet, smiling and holding a fist with the words 'Hong Kong Hang On!' On the side. Photo from Billy H.C. Kwok / Getty Images.



Fig. 5: A chains of Pepe with different look, hands in hands. Screen captured from Denise Tsang (@denis_tsang), 'Love this Pepe-the-Frog chain at the Shum Shui Po Lennon Wall,' Twitter, August 23, 2019, <https://twitter.com/denise%5C_tsang/status/1164779085186211840?ref%5C_src=twsrc%5Et-fw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1164779085186211840%7Ctwgr%5E%7Ctwcon%5Es1%5C_&ref%5C_url=https%3A%2F%2Fstayhipp.com%2Fnews%2Fpepe-the-frog-as-a-symbol-for>.



Fig. 6: Graffiti of Pepe found outside the Central Government complex, depicted with a board with the word 'Hope'. Photo from Billy H.C. Kwok / Getty Images.

The Hong Kong protestors do not only use Pepe to personify their ideals: Pepe is also used to express frustration and anger towards the government and the police. For example, Pepe is depicted without one eye after a journalist was shot in the eye by the police. Pepe is elsewhere also depicted as a crying character, helping out two other characters, LIHKG Pig (連登豬) and LIHKG Dog (連登狗), two mascots well-known on the forum of LIHKG, when the three of them are attacked by a smoke grenade. There has been much creativity derived from the depiction of Pepe the Frog as sad, weeping and upset. Pepe relates the emotions sensed by the protestors, and in turn, symbolises their disillusionment towards the authorities.

Such a sensation of dissatisfaction, as well as the sense of being the victimized underdog in the situation may echo the ideology of 'loserdom' adopted by the American alt-right in the manner described by Beran.¹⁵ However, I contend that the two cases are different. For one, by portraying Pepe as an injured character, the Hong Konger protestors actively attempt to work as a voice for a change, so that no one will be hurt 'in the same way'. They are frustrated about the status quo, intimidated by the violence done to them, and they illustrate such bitterness by turning Pepe into the victim who suffers from these harms. As

15 Beran, "4chan: The Skeleton Key to the Rise of Trump," 2017.

demonstrated earlier, such depiction is the Hong Kongers' 'Pepe-self'. It is the projection of the Hong Kongers' feeling. But it does not follow that they automatically fully agree with this depiction *per se*.

By representing Pepe in these ways, the Hong Kongers attach him to the naked reality of the political situation, aiming to prompt viewers to reflect on the moral and/or social questions behind these moments. Concurrently, such memes also work to denounce the suffering seemingly inflicted upon the Hong Kongers as it is onto Pepe. It is at this point that Hong Kong's Pepe is distinguished from his counterpart in the US, where the partisans of 'Pepe the Loser' passionately embrace his self-effacing, bizarre, loser's 'values', rationalising them as an attempt to alter their own 'loser' status.



Fig. 7: Pepe the Frog, LIHKG Pig and LIHKG Dog. Screen captured from Lamjj (@Lamjj5), 'Pepe and his friends in hong kong Twitter, August 21, 2019, <https://twitter.com/Lamjj5/status/1163972363643318272/photo/1>.



Figure 8: Pepe, with a yellow helmet, depicted as a patient with an eye bleeding, with the words: Police Shot MY EYE. Give me back my eye! Screen captured from Alvin Lum (@alvinllun), 'In Queen Mary Hospital, some medical staff showed support for one one lady who is shot blind on Sun,' Twitter, August 13, 2019, <https://twitter.com/alvinllum/status/>.



Fig. 9: A sobbing Pepe with the words "Don't Beat Me", seemingly a protest against police brutality. "2019 Hong Kong Anti-Extradition Bill Protests - "Don't Beat Me" Pepe the Frog sign," Know Your Meme, 2020, retrieved from <http://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1543273-2019-hong-kong-anti-extradition-bill-protests>.

In addition, Pepe the Frog has also gone viral among Hong Kong netizens, further spreading the ideas of the political movement to internet users. He appears in the form of Whatsapp and Telegrams stickers, personifying both encouraging emotions and the rage and will-to-troll against the authorities. In using these stickers, the social media users can relate the context of their conversation to the political situation they are in, incidentally mock the authorities, or simply relate the emotions of a specific Pepe to their instant feeling (of course in turn, upon seeing Pepe, the user of that sticker would also be reminded of the political movement to some degree). In every aforementioned case, by relating individual emotions and political realities to Pepe the Frog, this meme has become politicized and functions as a protesting strategy in Hong Kong, just in a very different way to its political deployments in the USA.

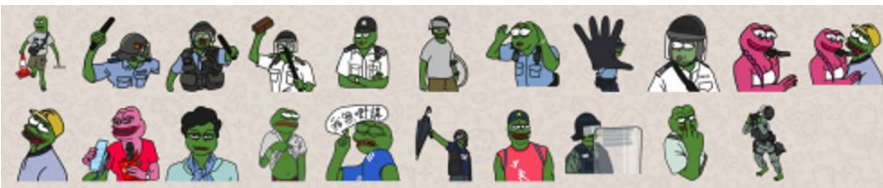


Fig. 10: A Pepe sticker pack as a troll to the government and police, including one, the third one from the left on the bottom row, depicting the chief executive of Hong Kong, Ms Carrie Lam, "Polite Pepe," WhatSticker, <https://whatsticker.online/p/18668317p5Lmt/HK/zh>.



Fig. 11: One of the many sticker packs depicting Pepe as the Hong Kong protestors and Pepe as the Hong Kong police. "Fighting Pepe," Stickers.cloud, retrieved from <https://stickers.cloud/pack/fighting-pepe>.

The Becoming of 'Pepe the Omnipotent'

Pepe the Frog, escaping from its detestable character in the US, has become an adorable figure, a mascot in the political movement in Hong Kong. The singular political situation in Hong Kong allows the city to be an incubator for new understandings of signs and symbols. Yet such a context does not necessarily mean that any sign or symbol can automatically acquire new meanings once they enter Hong Kong. While new meanings await when a meme enters a new context, and social media content is a highly entextualizable environment, there remains a gap between a new meaning being *awaited* and a new meaning being *realized*. In other words, after being entextualized from its old context, but before being appropriated in the new context, an additional step is required. This is where Pepe

the Frog is able to acquire his diverse characters. Specifically, this is where the characters taken up by Pepe can be *negotiated* and *identified* by Hong Kongers. This step, therefore, is crucial because it links the free-floating Pepe to how it is later materialized in the political movement.

To begin with, the omnipresence of Pepe in Hong Kong indicates that the Hong Konger protestors relate to him. I argue that such relation is an identification, and has a bilateral dimension: while the Hong Konger protestors can identify their sadness, frustration and anger with Pepe, Pepe can also be made to relate by representing an injured journalist, a hopeful protestor, the corrupt police, etc. There is a continual negotiation of identification between Pepe and the Hong Konger protestors that allows Pepe to take up different personae. Pepe, thus, can become an omnipotent being. And this continual negotiation of identification is the crucial step that links entextualization and appropriation together.

Sirpa Leppänen et al. argue that within social media contexts, it is such a process of identification that first allows entextualization to occur. They suggest that, while social media have gradually become ‘grassroots arenas’ where different cultural groups interact, these interactions and activities oftentimes ‘overlap, complement and intertwine’ with their offline affairs. While identifying with the content from social media is a recurring process, just as how social groups continually identify themselves via offline social activities, there exists an intertwined relationship between the two wheels of identification. This process finally leads to the entextualization of the content from its original context on the social media.¹⁶

This mechanism is a good description of the case of Pepe in Hong Kong. Through such identification, the appropriation of Pepe in the new context is also made possible. While the protestors engage themselves in the political movement, they are also concurrently exposed to different content available in the online arena, which in turn would reflect back upon their offline situation in their interpretation of this content. Being fans of Trump increases the possibility they might encounter the meme of Pepe the Frog, but extracting the frowning, grumpy frog from its context of hatred to become a symbol of genuine sadness, hope, anger and trolling requires a linkage be made by the Hong Konger protestors between Pepe and the political context in Hong Kong. Such a linkage is only possible through a continuous dialectical identification between the Hong Konger protestors and Pepe. And such a linkage, due to this continuous dialectical identification, leads to Pepe’s entextualization from its original context and his final appropriation by Hong Kongers.

To further illustrate using ‘Pepe the Press’ as an example, we can see that the identification process goes like this: Hong Kongers first feel the importance of the press in the

16 Sirpa Leppänen, Samu Kytölä, Henna Jousmäki, Saija Peuronen, and Elina Westinen, “Entextualization and Resemiotization As Resources for Identification in Social Media,” in *The Language of Social Media: Identity and Community on the Internet*, ed. Seargeant, Philip, and Caroline Tagg, (London, 2014), 112-114.

political movement by their continued presence and support. With that in mind, Hong Kongers project such a thought onto Pepe when encountering him online. Such an encounter is where the two wheels—the ceaseless social events happening to the Hong Kongers and the recurrent online appearance of Pepe before them—meet. Projecting their subjective thoughts onto Pepe implies that the Hong Kongers can identify their experience with him. Such identification first allows Pepe to be dragged from its original online circle—*entextualised*—and to be harnessed in the new ‘Hong Kongers’ circle’—*appropriated*. It is also during such identification that, as Bauman and Briggs put it, the Hong Kongers can ‘make a stretch’ of their experiences into Pepe, pulling him from his original context.¹⁷ It is at this moment where ‘Pepe the Press’ can rise, where Pepe takes up the character the Hong Kongers assign to him. Along the same vein, the Hong Konger protestors project different experiences and emotions from the dynamic offline arena onto Pepe. From this, different characters—‘Pepe the One-eye Journalist’, ‘Pepe the Protestor’, ‘Carrie Lam Pepe—are negotiated and then assigned to him. Such continual negotiation of identification enables Pepe to assume different personae. Identifying with Pepe, the Hong Kongers can then appropriate the meme to their advantage and make Pepe their own possession, devising and weaponizing different Pepes in different arenas.

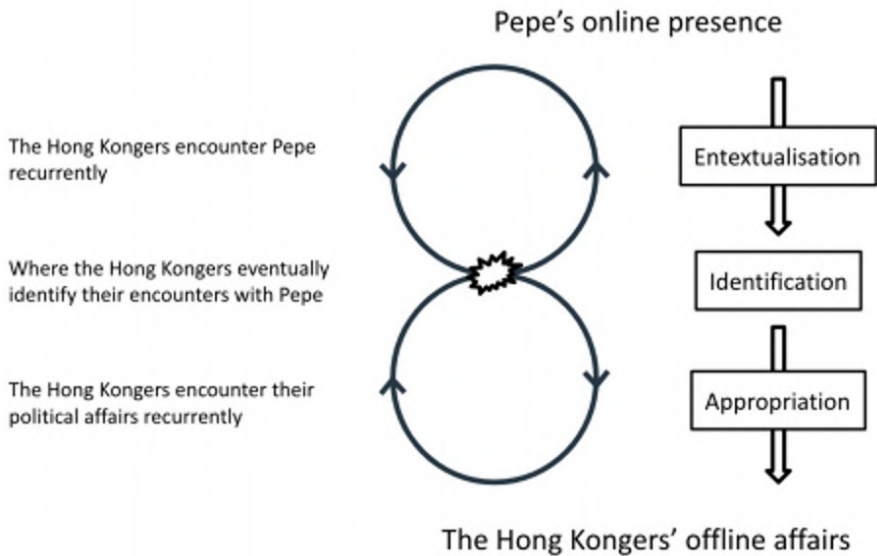


Fig. 12: How Pepe is eventually entextualized from its original context to be appropriated by the Hong Kongers in a new context through recurrent identification.

17 Bauman and Briggs, “Poetics and Performance as Critical Perspectives on Language and Social Life,” 73.

The way Pepe has gained his second life in Hong Kong shows that one can identify a meme through relating to one's own referential background, experiences and emotions, and this is where entextualization can occur and appropriation can follow. Born amid Hong Kong's political turmoil, an ambiguous and turbulent zone, Pepe the Hong Konger shows us how a political meme can attain new meanings. He shows us how memes can acquire various characters and express diverse characteristics. He also shows us that memes do not only appear as a joke or parody but also allow us to reflect on more serious affairs, such as political and social issues¹⁸. We must therefore ask what memes can mean to us and do for us besides merely trolling others. Can political memes be salvaged from their bare joking aspect, and be involved in a political movement in a more agonistic way? Pepe the Omnipotent's response seems to be affirmative.

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18 Kulkarni, "Internet Meme and Political Discourse: A study on the Impact of Internet Meme as a Tool in ²⁰ Communicating Political Satire, 13; and Kuipers, "Where Was King Kong When We Needed Him?," 80.

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