

The Supply of Virtue: Tracing Rituals in the Umbrella Movement

MOK Ming Gar

A ritual is “a sequence of activities involving gestures, words, and objects, performed in a sequestered place, and performed according to set sequence” (Bell 1997:138). It is characterized by formalism, traditionalism, invariance, sacral symbolism and performance. During the Umbrella Movement, one of the daily rituals that I observed and actively participated was to deliver and collect supplies at the supply stations (物資站). The station itself served as a site of ritual. The members of this social group were not limited to the volunteers of the supply stations. The participants of the protest were also part of it. Media depicted the operation of the supply stations as an unorganized coordination among a group of inexperienced people.

“While the numbers grew, it was difficult to coordinate supplies, as some stations had no set leaders to keep track of depleting stocks...The lack of centralized planning meant that supplies could overflow in one station and be short in another” (2014).

However, from what I observed in these few days in the supply stations, I argue that the supply stations are sites that involve culturally complex structures, which meant greatly to the whole protest as well as to the participants involved in. Below I discuss the insights drawn from my own experiences, including the hierarchy within the protest, the interactions between the participants, categories of supplies, and their meanings and functions.

I joined the supply station on the third day (September 29, 2014) of the protest. At first I did not know how to contribute to the movement, and thus I asked some volunteers in one of the supply stations whether I could join them or not. Some responded that I could join them whenever I wanted. They then started assigning duties to me, and introduced the station ‘coordinator’ Fai to me. Fai, a boy younger than me who was 19 years old at the time, was the one who coordinated with other stations through phone and allocated stocks to other places. Later Fai told me that he did not belong to any party or organization, and he also did not start the station. He became the leader because he was the one of the first who joined the protest. He also stated that “actually everyone could be the leader here, you could also be the leader...Actually I’m not the leader. I’m just the coordinator”. Hierarchy was implicit in this supply station. Although Fai was the one who usually gave orders or instructions, everyone else there also sometimes gave suggestions or orders. I once noticed that there was an

overflow for plastic wrappings, so I asked three others to send them to another supply station by truck.

The delivering and collecting of supplies also provided another insight for me. Many times Fai and other volunteers shouted at people who were standing in front of the station and trying to decide what to take. They were saying to the people “don’t choose! Just pick any!” (唔好揀啦！是但攞個！) while giving them a drink or some bread, and asking them not to stay there for too long. When sometimes people took too many items, they would ask, “do you really want them at all? You can come back later and take more if they are not enough” (唔夠先再嚟攞啦！). In fact, the supplies during those days were plenty, so the appeal was not about the concern of food shortage, but rather an ethical advice. On the other hand, the donation of the supplies also revealed the power difference between the donors and us. There were always donors sending food and medical supplies, bringing a bulk of bottled water or even thousands of masks to the supply stations. Nonetheless, these donors, though materially contributed much more than us, often still said “thank you” to us, and sincerely asked what else they could bring to us or what they could do, as if we were their commanders. Power here does not seem to be related to social class, financial contribution or experience, but rather to the physical involvement in the protest.

The supply itself is also worth analyzing. According to my experience, there were different kinds of supplies collected. However, as I observed, these supplies were confined to emergency and protest-use supplies, including masks, medicines and plastic wraps, daily necessities like napkins, towels and shampoos, and food and beverages mostly for energy supply, such as energy drinks, chocolates, bread and bananas. These supplies were all for practical use. More precisely, these items were just for satisfying basic needs, and thus not polished or fancy (e.g. there was no snack or expensive personal luxury).

It is suggested, “[a] wide spectrum of rituals has been politicized and given symbolic import that fosters a collective identification” (Gusfield 2000). Protestors are viewed as a cultural group based on their shared subjective consciousness (including “fighting against the government”, “demanding civil nomination”, etc.). At the symbolic level, their collective identity was created and reinforced through this ‘ritual’ in the supply station (Seton-Watson 1977:5). Just like ‘you are what you eat’, it is what they use reminded them of their identity as protestor. As mentioned above, the supplies were confined to emergency use. When they were using or taking those supplies, they realized themselves as protestors. For example, at night when the people who stayed overnight were getting blankets from us, they again realized their identity as long-term fighting protestors. Moreover, the fact that the stations were run spontaneously and the supplies were donated but not bought has also reinforced their identity as volunteers. It is through these everyday interactions that the identities were created, represented and reinforced.

Moreover, the distribution of supplies also maintained and perpetuated the high moral stance of the protest. As the volunteers kept asking participants not to “choose” but to “take” supplies, not to take too much but to take what is enough, the participants were by this way, asked to oppress their personal desires and selfishness for what they want, and showed their concerns for others’ welfare and benefits. Also, they were also asked to take items only when they truly need them (e.g. thirsty, hungry or got hurt). This was not due to the practical concern for supply shortage, but symbolizes human beings fulfilling the basic needs of the body, i.e. don’t need to be full but only need to survive. Through these appeals and acts, the actions actually symbolize the value of self-sacrificing, for others and for one self. This kind of altruism and the virtue of ‘sacrifice’ were thereby integrated into the whole protest campaign (Teske 2009:101).

“Every ceremony is an expression of affective states of the mind of two or more persons” (Radcliffe-Brown 1952). On the social aspect, the ritual in station promotes social solidarity and also expresses feelings. Allowing people to join the station as well as allowing participants to donate supplies, the members of the supply stations felt more engaged in the protest that they found a way to make more solid contributions. Rather than sitting there and yelling slogans as civilians or other protestors did, which seemed to be less involved and connected, they had taken up more responsibilities than others. They grew intimate with the protest. The solidarity made them more integrated into the whole movement. On top of that, the supply stations also served to arouse sentiments and morale among the volunteers, the donors and all the protestors. The expression of sentiments was not only about saying ‘thank you’ to the volunteers. In fact when we were distributing materials and transporting supplies, we frequently received praises like ‘Cheer Up! (加油呀!)’ or even applause. Encouragement was expressed through this way. Moreover, these acts of delivering and collecting of supplies have also gained praises from many outsiders, or even foreign reporters. It was described that ‘The station shows the concern for how fragrant fellow protestors are’ (2014), which in turn raised the morale again.

Radcliffe-Brown (1952:157) argued that not only the individual’s sentiments were developed through the ritual, but the society also relies on these sentiments in order to survive and continue. It seems that it is this kind of sentiment and morale that kept the protest going, and allowed the protestors to fight for what they want until this day.

References

- Bell, Catherine. 1997. *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*. New York: Oxford University Press. pp. 138
- Gusfield, Joseph R. 2000. *Performing Action: Artistry in Human Behavior and Social Research*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.
- Radcliffe-Brown, Alfred. 1952. *Structure and Function in Primitive Society: Posthumously*. Glencoe, Illinois: Free Print.
- Seton-Watson, Hugh. 1977. *Nations and States*. London: Methuen.
- Teske, Nathan. 2009. *Political Activists in America: The Identity Construction Model of Political Participation*. University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press. p. 101.
- "Organisers Keep on Top of Supplies for Hong Kong Occupy Central Protesters." *South China Morning Post*. N.p., n.d. Web. 13 Oct. 2014.
- "Things That Could Only Happen in a Hong Kong Protest". *BBC News*. N.p., n.d. Web. 19 Oct. 2014.