

Meme-ing post-COVID Hong Kong:
Collective resistance in the advancement to prosperity

In the Web 2.0 era, memes have become a ubiquitous means of everyday communication on the Internet. The intertextuality and multimodality of memes allow them to interact with various narratives and become an integral part of constructing a public discourse. More importantly, in the process of continuously remixing and reproducing memes through user-generated content sites, memes have become a cultural artefact that is participatory and dynamic, opening up its possibility of representing public voices and identity. Memes may be trivial and mundane in contrast to dominant political narratives and other cultural products, but their silliness does not undermine their seriousness in addressing public discourse.

Therefore, this essay aims to situate memes in the present post-COVID Hong Kong. By studying how the official statement of “from stability to prosperity” is reappropriated as memes and spread across the online sphere, we explore how such memes have contributed to voicing opinions and connecting the public in the aftermath of 2019 Anti-ELAB Movement and COVID-19 pandemics. The essay starts by reviewing the literature on the nature of memes and their significance in the sociopolitical realm. The second part focuses on how these memes represent a resistance to the official narrative and manifest a collective identity, by referring to the Freudian work on jokes and humour. Finally, we discuss the (im)possibility of memeing as a way of living after past traumatic memories.

The concept of memes has undergone major changes since its first introduction by biologist Richard Dawkins, who attempted to define memes, analogous to genes, as cultural units of transmission which spread by replications. Darwin's examples of memes include melodies, catchphrases, clothing fashions and abstract beliefs¹. It was not until the late 1990s that memes started to be inalienable with the Internet and online communities. Shifman has redefined memes to be "a group of digital items that share common characteristics in their form, content, and stance, which were created with awareness of each other, and were put into circulation, imitated and/or transformed through the Internet by different users."² Her definition suggests that memes are intertextual. They should be understood not as isolated pieces of work, but interrelated with cultural references in creative ways. Moreover, memes are multimodal in that memes can be in the form of text, images and videos, or a combination of these³. Through juxtaposing images and phrases, and remixing various cultural references, Internet memes are not simply an idea, but the material expression or representation of meanings that is acquired from digital media⁴.

Memes also constitute a genre of digital artefact in the model of participatory culture. In Darwin's evolutionary account of memes and definitions by scholars like Susan Blackmore, human beings are hosts and machines operated by memes⁵. The agency of people is minimized in the production and transmission of memes. However, it is clear that in the Web 2.0 era, memes have become a genre of multimodal text that is highly dynamic. Receivers of memes are no longer passive readers, but by adding texts to the image or altering the image before forwarding it, receivers can also be producers. Arising from the participatory

¹ Limon Shifman, "A Telegraphic Biography of a Conceptual Troublemaker," in *Memes in Digital Culture* (MIT Press, 2013), 9.

² Limon Shifman, "Introduction," in *Memes in Digital Culture* (MIT Press, 2013), 7-8.

³ Steven Kwok-Leung Chan et al., "The Eye4HK Meme and the Construction of an Injustice Frame," *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 15, no.2 (2023): 36. <https://doi.org/10.5130/ccs.v15.i2.8556>.

⁴ Viktor Chagas, "Memes as vernacular politics," in *Research Handbook on Visual Politics* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2023), 299.

⁵ Chagas, "Memes as vernacular politics," 299.

process is a memetic chain in which netizens make their own contributions to a ‘family of memes.’⁶ Also, the production and transformation of memes are friendly to amateurs, thanks to the many applications of image and video editing. Therefore, Milner has identified internet meme as a participatory artefact that is open, collaborative and adaptive⁷. The memeing practice, which includes the creation, circulation and transformation of memes, has opened up the possibility for a community of practice suggested by Henry Jenkins, in which a community of poachers take raw materials from other cultural texts and appropriated and remixed them for their own creative expression⁸.

In an era driven by a hypermemetic logic suggested by Shifman, almost every major public event can be a source of memes⁹. Although mundane and trivial, memes display the potential to tell everyday stories from a bottom-up perspective. Therefore, a number of scholars have suggested investigating the role of memes in constructing public discourses. Milner considered memes to be important social texts that construct societal discourses. Through these social texts, people piece together a reality¹⁰. The study of political memes by Viktor Chaga suggested that memes operate as a kind of vernacular politics as they allow the reading of opinions of a public sphere regarding the events experienced, and help more people to cope with the events¹¹. Memes are the devices for communicating everyday politics, with which people situate themselves politically in their daily lives¹².

⁶ Chan et al., “The Eye4HK Meme,” 37.

⁷ Ryan M. Milner, “The world made meme: Discourse and identity in participatory media,” PhD thesis, (University of Kansas, 2012), 12.

⁸ Henry Jenkins, Mizuko Ito, and Danah Boyd, “Defining Participatory Culture,” in *Participatory Culture in a Networked Era: A Conversation on Youth, Learning, Commerce, and Politics* (Polity Press, 2016), 1.

⁹ Shifman, “Introduction,” 4.

¹⁰ Milner, “The world made meme,” 15.

¹¹ Chagas, “Memes as vernacular politics,” 302.

¹² Ivan Gusic and Martin Lundqvist, “‘Meme-Ing’ Peace in Northern Ireland: Exploring the Everyday Politics of Internet Memes in Belfast Riots,” *International Journal of Communication* 17 (2023): 6315.

In Hong Kong, social media has always been a crucial site for the development of political campaigns. Especially during the 2014 Umbrella Movement, the use of yellow or blue ribbon as a symbol for political inclination manifests how identity can be declared through visual codes on social networking sites. In the Anti-ELAB Movement in 2019, memes played a significant role. Jacobs et al. discussed how the many appropriations and remixing of Pepe-the Frog have created a nuanced or fluctuating positioning of Hong Kong identity, and acknowledged women activists, interpreting the original USA Alt-right meme in an opposite direction¹³. On the other hand, Chan et al. studied how the Eye4HK campaign made use of the memetic production and reproduction of eye-covering selfies, thereby building transnational collective identity and amplifying emotions and discontent towards police brutality¹⁴.

However, the study of memes amid a major political movement remains to be to some extent spectacle. Gusic and Lundqvist used Northern Ireland as a starting point to study the everyday politics of internet memes in a postwar Belfast setting. They considered the function of humour in memes, suggesting that humour may function as resistance against dominant hegemonic narratives. By poking fun at tragic memories and encounters, humour serves as a coping mechanism and helps build solidarity among victims. While in postwar Belfast, everyday politics is still related to the past conflicts, memeing is “mundane or routine ways to position oneself in relation to peace and conflict.”¹⁵ By looking at the example of Belfast, we see how memes function in the aftermath of a social tragedy by offering a remedy for coping with the past and present.

¹³ Katrien Jacobs et al., “The Pepe the Frog Image-meme in Hong Kong: Visual Recurrences and Gender Fluidity on the LIHKG Forum,” *Journal of Digital Social Research* 4, no.4 (2022): 146.

¹⁴ Chan et al., “The Eye4HK Meme,” 44.

¹⁵ Gusic and Lundqvist, “‘Meme-Ing’ Peace in Northern Ireland,” 6315-6317.

The benefits of ‘from stability to prosperity’

Since Chief Executive John KC Lee took office in 2022, “from stability to prosperity 由治及興” has been adopted as a major slogan for the governance of Hong Kong, often repeated by both local and Beijing top officials. This slogan is written in view of a restoration to normalcy after the severe hit to the society brought by the 2019 protests and the COVID-19 pandemic. In the official narrative, it is the implementation of the National Security Law which brought the society from chaos to order, and from order we may advance to prosperity.

After the turmoil over the past few years, Hong Kong has achieved a major transition from chaos to order, and is at the crucial stage of advancing to prosperity.

Excerpt 1 Welcome message on the Chief Executive Website¹⁶

However, the grand vision of prosperity restoration has not come into reality after the abolishment of COVID-19 policies in March 2023. With the constant relocation of foreign enterprises, plunging Hang Seng Index, and closed down shops all over the once busy streets, pessimism and gloom enshroud Hong Kong. “From stability to prosperity” appears to be a slogan detached from the actual Hong Kong situation, unable to describe what most citizens are experiencing. In April 2024, on a prevalent local forum LIHKG, a post titled “The societal atmosphere is so dreadful that it seems like some big events are about to happen”

¹⁶ John KC Lee, “Welcome Message,” Chief Executive Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, May 7, 2024, <https://www.ceo.gov.hk/en/welcome.html>.

(而家社會氣氛沉滯到好似等緊大事發生) was published, under which user *Chizuru Mizuhara* 水原千鶴 left the below comment:

咁係因為你悲觀, 我睇到由治及興帶嚟嘅好處

It's just that you are pessimistic, I see the benefits brought by "from stability to prosperity"

Such a remark has soon become a popular catchphrase in the forum. The statement is reappropriated and remixed with different images and videos by various LIHKG users, becoming a collection of memes circulating not only in the forum, but also within daily conversations of citizens in the city.

In some sense, whether the slogan shall be considered a political soundbite adopted by the government or a vernacular meme in the society, they operate in a similar manner. Chagas pointed out that a soundbite is usually a short quote which is detached from wider context, which matches with the case of “from stability to prosperity,” and its purpose is to act as a mnemonic anchor¹⁷. That is, it does not matter whether there really is prosperity when it is a belief in the official narrative. Chagas further argued that memes operate similarly in that they are trial balloons for political opinion and commentary¹⁸. Here we see that, by appropriating the official statement of “from stability to prosperity,” netizens attempt to oppose the official narrative of prosperity. The role of humour in these memes resonates with Hernann’s ideas that humour

¹⁷ Chagas, “Memes as vernacular politics,” 301.

¹⁸ Chagas, “Memes as vernacular politics,” 301.

“offers people the possibility of resisting marginalization and generating alternative, sometimes subversive, versions of dominant narratives and official history”.¹⁹

It is at the moment when pleasure is found in a joke and the comic effect of a meme is released, that the alternative narrative represented by memes is understood. Freud summarized the definition of jokes to be “sense in nonsense”.²⁰ Literally, the statement means that it is our pessimism that blocks us from seeing the prosperity after restoring social order in Hong Kong. However, as the same statement is being repeatedly used as a response to the dreadful economy in Hong Kong, meanings cannot be associated under strict logic as there are no benefits to be seen. At this point, the joke is meaningless, is nonsense, but at the same time we are illuminated in the sense that the visioned prosperity is an illusion, and that the slogan of “from stability to prosperity” is a hoax. By saying that “I see the benefits brought by from stability to prosperity”, the official narrative is appropriated to construct an alternative counternarrative of distrust of the government and pessimism about the future.



Figure 1 A popular gif meme of “from stability to prosperity” combining dissimilar elements

¹⁹ Gusic and Lundqvist, “‘Meme-Ing’ Peace in Northern Ireland,” 6315-6316.

²⁰ Sigmund Freud, “Introduction,” in *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Vol. VIII: Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth and the Institute of Psychoanalysis), 12.

Following this line of thought, the more absurd a meme is, the bigger humour it can provide, in that there is a stark contrast between sense and nonsense. **Figure 1** is an example of a popular “from stability to prosperity” meme which remixes random and dissimilar elements to become nonsense. A female writing out “just because you are pessimistic 咁係因為你悲觀” in some sort of *qigong* hand gestures, a golden sparkling dragon hopping out of the Victoria Harbour, and a news clip of the opening ceremony of Hong Kong Night Vibes 香港夜繽紛 showing a white lion which is usually featured in a Chinese funeral²¹. All the visual elements are so unrelated that it makes the whole meme more absurd and difficult to make sense of. Unlike some other memes in the same family which explicitly relate the statement “from stability to prosperity” to the poor performance of the stock market, this meme is more like a “parody of traditional memes,”²² combining Chinese martial arts, generic Chinese symbols of prosperity and awkward moments of the government. This is a characteristic of ironic memes: generic manipulation and interpretive inaccessibility make the memes “against meaning itself.”²³ Such memes may be less direct, but they bring a larger comic effect, which amplifies the counternarrative that these memes represent.

The reason that memes are effective in representing voices subversive to a hegemonic narrative is that, when memes are viewed as humour, they “allow for playing with misunderstandings, absurdity, and/or contrasts, as there is no demand for coherence or truth in humor.”²⁴ It is, in particular, remarkable in present days Hong Kong in which the National Security Law has drawn an ambiguous red line in expressing one’s opinions. When direct and blatant criticism deviating from the official narrative can be

²¹ It has later been clarified that the lion was a silver lion instead.

²² Vinicio Ntouvlis and Jarret Geenen, “‘Ironic memes’ and digital literacies: Exploring identity through multimodal texts,” *New Media & Society*: 12. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448231189801>.

²³ Ntouvlis and Geenen, “Ironic memes,” 12.

²⁴ Gusic and Lundqvist, “‘Meme-Ing’ Peace in Northern Ireland,” 6315.

dangerous, humour can at least partly allow an escape from these risks²⁵. It is the brevity of the meme of “benefits of from stability to prosperity” that prevents its speaker from political risks, as Secretary of Security Tang Ping-keung answered: “it would be too rash to decide whether a line from the Internet violates (Article 23) without any context.”²⁶

Gusic and Lundqvist’s discussion on the function of humour echoes Freud’s work on jokes. Freud explains the brevity of jokes by the process of condensation, in which some elements of the latent thought are lost, while some take over the energy of the former and become intensified or over-intensified. Therefore, jokes are meant to be told with words that are insufficient for interpretation by strict logic or common modes of communication.²⁷ In the memes of “from stability to prosperity”, what is being condensed is the incompetence of the government and the actual condition of the society, and what is being exaggerated is the seemingly bright vision of “from stability to prosperity”. Freud attributes the condensation process to unconscious thinking as it avoids inhibition of illogical and irrational expressions by consciousness²⁸. Yet, in the case of “from stability to prosperity” memes, condensation is crucial to make the memes nonsensical, allowing them to escape the restraint on expression. It is not an unconscious process, but a deliberate tactic to tell stories from an angle opposite to the official narrative.

²⁵ Gusic and Lundqvist, “‘Meme-Ing’ Peace in Northern Ireland,” 6316.

²⁶ “諷刺「由治及興的好處」會否觸犯 23 條？鄧炳強指不能輕率評論,” *inmediahk.net*, January 31, 2024, <https://www.inmediahk.net/node/%E6%94%BF%E7%B6%93/%E8%AB%B7%E5%88%BA%E3%80%8C%E7%94%B1%E6%B2%BB%E5%8F%8A%E8%88%88%E7%9A%84%E5%A5%BD%E8%99%95%E3%80%8D%E6%9C%83%E5%90%A6%E8%A7%B8%E7%8A%AF23%E6%A2%9D%EF%BC%9F-%E9%84%A7%E7%82%B3%E5%BC%B7%E6%8C%87%E4%B8%8D%E8%83%BD%E8%BC%95%E7%8E%87%E8%A9%95%E8%AB%96>.

²⁷ Freud, “Introduction,” 13.

²⁸ Sigmund Freud, “The Relation of Jokes to Dreams and to the Unconscious,” in *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Vol. VIII: Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth and the Institute of Psychoanalysis), 165

Vibing with memes: markers of collective identity

Memes are social constructs. They reflect shared norms and values,²⁹ in ways that are specific to a certain community. Intelligibility is a condition for communicating with memes and jokes. The distortion of representations through condensation is only meaningful when a third person possesses the ability to set it straight. In other words, irony is only effective when the other person is prepared to hear the opposite³⁰. Therefore, memeing requires a certain degree of cultural literacy, and this separates who are the in-groups and out-groups for the particular family of memes.

Memes may be nonsensical and silly, but the (re)production and sharing of memes on the Internet undeniably resembles what Rey Chow describes to be “quotidian activities”. These activities “consume the world around them in useless, unglamorous modes, but they also bring them surprising illuminations.”³¹ While the fate of post-COVID Hong Kong is mostly determined by the Beijing and Hong Kong government, what we see from the activities surrounding “from stability to prosperity” memes is a lifestyle of struggle and resistance against the hegemonic political powers in the virtual space of the Internet. The Internet is surely an open space which is at the same time fragile. Examples can be seen in LIHKG forum where there are always accused *hitters* (paid supporters of some parties) and *50 cents* (defendants of the government). It is true that the Internet is a space easily appropriated by political and economic forces, but it is also a commonplace which allows ordinary netizens to come together, interact with each other and reproduce intertextual memes with their vernacular creativity. Because memes are

²⁹ Shifman, “A Telegraphic Biography of a Conceptual Troublemaker,” 15.

³⁰ Sigmund Freud, “The Relation of Jokes to Dreams and to the Unconscious,” 174, 179.

³¹ Rey Chow, “Things, Common/Places, Passages of the Port City: On Hong Kong and Hong Kong Author Leung-Ping-kwan,” in *Ethics after Idealism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998): 181.

produced in a bottom-up manner, their vernacular nature gives them the power to express a collective opinion.³² Therefore, by studying how memes circulate on the Internet, we investigate how memes become a mediated language for communicating counternarratives.

Chan, et al. discussed the importance of collective identity in connecting social groups in social movements, with the use of visual codes to construct boundaries for identity formation.³³ Memes are particularly effective for this function in that they are designed to be intertextual and multimodal artefacts. By remixing pop cultural references, readily available cultural symbols are being reappropriated and transformed into new symbols which activate common experiences and collective memory, thus further strengthening group identity.



Figure 2 A gif meme appropriating the film series *Young and Dangerous*

³² Chagas, "Memes as vernacular politics," 305.

³³ Chan et al., "The Eye4HK Meme," 38, 42.



Figure 3 A gif meme appropriating the film *King of Comedy*

Figure 2 shows a meme creation using a scene from the film series *Young and Dangerous* 古惑仔. This film series based on the story of local young triad members was a big hit at the time around the 1997 handover. The series also is a well-known symbol of Hong Kong films in the Sinophone region. The triad members' desire to build a new order and their fearlessness can be seen as a resistance to the grand narrative of nationalism and handover discourse. The characters are not only young and dangerous, but they are also untamable. They do not conform but seek breakthroughs from dominant narratives. Therefore,

using *Young and Dangerous* in the context of “from stability to prosperity” signifies an extra layer of resistance or subversion towards the official story of normalcy.

Figure 3 shows another creation using the opening scene of the movie *King of Comedy*, which is also a classic Hong Kong comedy. The scene depicted how acting enthusiast Stephen Chow, as Wan Tin-sau in the movie, started as an extra and was despised on the shooting set. *King of Comedy* was a story of a trivial and unimportant figure. Using Stephen Chow’s exaggerated expressions of ecstasy and distress to narrate the concept of “from stability to prosperity” hints at the contradictions that ordinary citizens find in the grand slogan. At the end of the short meme clip where Chow is hit after saying he sees the benefit of “from stability to prosperity”, it once again symbolizes the absurdity of the official narrative.

Both memes described above have adopted classic local films as visual ingredients in the reproduction of memes. The advantage of using movies as symbolic resources is that, on one hand, the famous scenes are immediately recognizable to many local netizens, thus creating resonance. On the other hand, these cultural artefacts already represent some alternative narratives to the dominating ones. Remixing them in the creation of new memes results in intertextuality and enriches the symbolic meanings of the memes. It is by such reproduction that the family of “from stability to prosperity” memes have accumulated more symbolic resources through association and shared identity³⁴.

³⁴ Chan et al., “The Eye4HK Meme,” 43.

Comparing the above two memes, the one featuring *Young and Dangerous* is better at resonating with local people. Its concatenation of “from stability to prosperity” 由治及興, Sinovac 科興, and Brother Mizuhara 水原師兄 is an obvious Cantonese rhyme play, making the textual component of the memes more memorable to Cantonese speakers. Moreover, its inclusion of Sinovac reminds people of the vaccination discourse and controversies in COVID-19 times, thus activating memory of collective experiences. Some comments pointed out that this meme is more of an inside joke in the LIHKG community, since those who do not know the origin of the catchphrase would not understand the reference to Brother Mizuhara. This further shows how the cross-references to other cultural texts determine how memes behave as markers of identity. While the use of a clever Cantonese rhyme and COVID-19 memories are relatable to ordinary citizens, there is an extra layer of comic reference that is exclusive to active LIHKG members only. The phatic community bonds fostered by memes come with boundaries, which decide who is accessible through its intertextuality³⁵.

It is worth noting that unlike Pepe the Frog or the Eye4HK Campaign, “from stability to prosperity” remains to be a local meme. The use of language and references of “from stability to prosperity” memes transform them into a *media lingua franca*³⁶. It is a multimodal, but vernacular device for everyday communications. One must possess cultural literacy of the local language and popular cultural references to fully grasp the humour and irony in these memes. Therefore, “from stability to prosperity” memes are social constructs not only in the sense that they reflect a collective resistance to the official story, but they also create a gateway for communications within the community.

³⁵ Ntouvlis and Geenen, “Ironic memes,” 3.

³⁶ Chagas, “Memes as vernacular politics,” 302.

Hello new Hong Kong

By normalizing violence, Belfast riot memes render violence as some laughable elements of everyday life, thus offering comic relief.³⁷ In a similar manner, in the daily transmission of “from stability to prosperity” memes, the enormous disparity between official and quotidian narratives have been normalized and become the source of humour. However, as Hung Ho-fung questions whether the restoration from chaos to order by the National Security Law can curb the political resistance once and for all³⁸, we may also ask a similar question: is the comic relief offered by memes a solution to the unrests and traumas experienced in the 2019 protest and COVID era? Is humour a short-term or long-term remedy to our despair?

Freud’s account of trauma asserts that traumatic memories must be abreacted in a sufficiently energetic reaction for the memories to fade and the associated affect to disappear³⁹. Thus, it is hard to imagine how multiple years of distressing protest and pandemic memories can be entirely managed by the energy released from memetic joy. In Hung’s model of territorial resistance, present Hong Kong is situated at quadrant IV, Confrontational resistance, suggesting that “Hong Kong could see a prolonged, low-intensity resistance against Chinese rule that will occasionally flare up into more open conflict when opportunities emerge.”⁴⁰ This seems to suggest that tranquility would not be long-lasting, An energetic response to the unsettled demands and remnants of traumatic memories would one day return as overt resistance.

³⁷ Gusic and Lundqvist, “‘Meme-Ing’ Peace in Northern Ireland,” 6326.

³⁸ Ho-fung Hung, “Conclusion: Endgame or New Beginning?” in *City on the Edge: Hong Kong under Chinese Rule* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 209.

³⁹ Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud, “On the Psychical Mechanism of Hysterical Phenomena: Preliminary Communication,” in *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Vol. II: Studies on Hysteria*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth and the Institute of Psychoanalysis), 8.

⁴⁰ Ho-fung Hung, “Conclusion: Endgame or New Beginning?”, 210-214.

Then, as we transit from “chaos to order” and say “Hello Hong Kong”, what is the significance of “from stability to prosperity” memes in relation to long-term resistance? In a society filled with pessimism and despair, Hui Po-keung believes that what is needed is rest, just like the street art “Take rest when tired 見乜就啱”. However, resting does not lead to passivity. To rest is to gather energy and accumulate meaning for living. Instead of hoping for a definite achievement, we should direct our hope to continuously breeding energy and seeking new meanings for existence, so that despair arising from an imperfect ending can be avoided.⁴¹

Memes as bottom-up creative artefact can be the source of this energy and meaningfulness of living in the city. In this essay, we have discussed how “from stability to prosperity” memes can represent a resistive reading to the official discourse of Hong Kong, accumulate symbolic resources and strengthen solidarity among its audience through memeing practices. By saying “I see the benefits of advancing from stability to prosperity,” we may be taking some comic relief from distressing public emotions, yet we should not overlook the potential of these vernacular memes in connecting it audiences and expressing collective resistance in a clever and subtle way. Learning how to live with past trauma, is to accept a possibly eternal loss, as well as a complete transition.⁴² We are saying Hello to a new Hong Kong, and we learn to live in a new Hong Kong, to which memeing could be a way. Whether we would live into prosperity, only time could tell.

⁴¹ 許寶強, *情感政治* (Hong Kong: 天窗出版社有限公司, 2018), 132-133, 151-153.

⁴² 許寶強, *情感政治*, 158.

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