

The Vaurawng Revolution and Art Activism: The Aestheticization of Protest, the Mobilization of Art and Music as a Resource for Movements in Hakha, Chin State

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Introduction

The political power and the importance of artwork and music in social and political movements have been well studied at the global level. Jacqueline Adams presented the ways some scholars have examined art's political power in the context of the social and political movement. First, actors use the medium of artistic expression for communicating with the larger society, for example, serving as a communications bridge between the students and other, say less-educated people, and with outsiders. Secondly, art can help mobilize protest and raise consciousness. Third, art is useful to movements because it keeps people active in and committed to a movement once they have already joined. Fourth, art and music are important in generating resources, both financial resources and outside support for the movement. Fifth, a movement's music prolongs a movement's impact after the movement is over by diffusing into the broader culture and changing popular mores and tastes. Finally, art can stir up emotions that are useful to movement in several of the above ways (Adams, 2002).

Although the importance of art in the social and political movement has been well studied, it seems to be the case that scholars and researchers pay little attention to art and music in analyzing social and political movements in Myanmar. In this work, the author briefly outlined how artworks and music have been integrated into the political protest in the Chin State's capital Hakha to give a clearer picture of the importance of taking artwork, poem and music account in studying social and political movements in Myanmar.

The 1 February 2021 political change triggered a mass protest across the country. Myanmar nationals in other countries like Germany, the US, Australia, Thailand and Japan staged street protests as early as 3-4 February (Soe, 2021) (SBS News, 2021) (Jay, 2021).

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In Myanmar, the first and widely held anti-military regime movement is the pot-banging protest which reportedly started in larger cities like Yangon and Mandalay and later spread across the country (AFP News, 2021). The ACLED, which produced a real-time data and analysis source on political violence and protest around the world, recorded no anti-coup protest on the first day of February in Myanmar (ACLED, 2021). However, on 3 February, health workers in Mandalay launched civil disobedience campaign, and hundreds of civil servants across that country already joined the movement by 4-5 February in which period, civil servants from different Government departments, including universities, stood in front of their respective office with a red ribbon holding up three-finger salutes. This is called the red ribbon movement.

It was only on 4 February that the first street protest appeared where about 24 people, including students, staged a street protest and chanted anti-coup slogans. The security forces intervened and arrested at least 4 people, including at least one student (Lynn, 2021). In Chin State, the first civil disobedience movement and pot-banging protest started on 3 February, and a protest march started with thousands of protesters in Hakha and Falam towns on 7 February (Chinland Guardian, 2021).

As the anti-coup protests go on across the country, protesters started to mobilize varieties of artworks and music for their repertoire of collective action. Protesters chanted slogans while carrying drawings, photographs, specific dress codes (like a traditional dress), read poems at rallies, drew pictures on roads, and sang songs while marching and holding rallies. Therefore, at least in some cases like Hakha, it is tenable to say that a better understanding of the ongoing protest requires a closer looks at the role of artwork, poem and music as key elements of collective action.

As the violent crackdown on protesters intensified, the number of songs and poems composed reportedly increased expressing sadness and denouncing the regime. Painting can also be widely seen across the country, songs were produced and poems were written in support of protesters, the CDM movements, and in honour of people who died during the crackdowns. The music and artworks travelled in cyberspace widely. The fact that the number of people killed has reached an unacceptable and unbearable extent is seemingly well expressed through artworks, poems, and music at least in the case of Hakha.

On 17 February, protesters in Hakha rallied and held a concert along with painting (The Chinland Post, 2021). On March 7, locals also held a sit-in protest, involving signings, painting, talk and showcased anti-coup drawings. On 10 March, a musical rally was held where protesters brought and played the guitars and other musical instruments. On 14

March, a sit-in protest in Hakha was mixed with a mini-concert. On 20 March in Mindat, people also staged a “music protest” where protesters played the guitar and other musical instruments as they sang songs. On 1 April, Youth organized a dawn protest and also staged a music protest, playing the guitars and singing songs (Chinland Guardian, 2021).

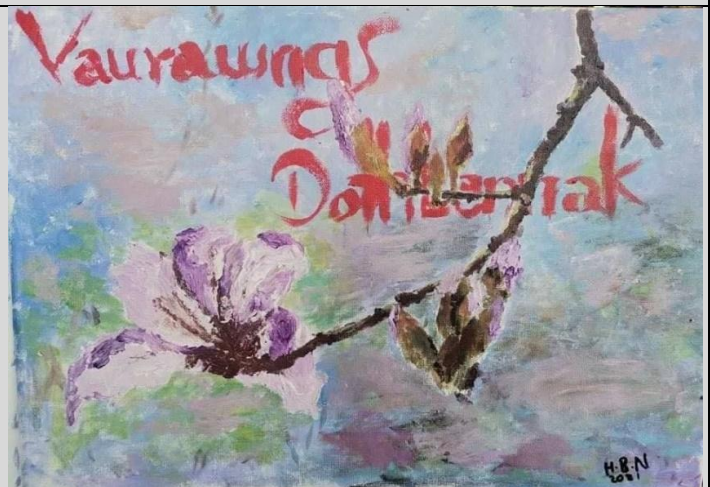
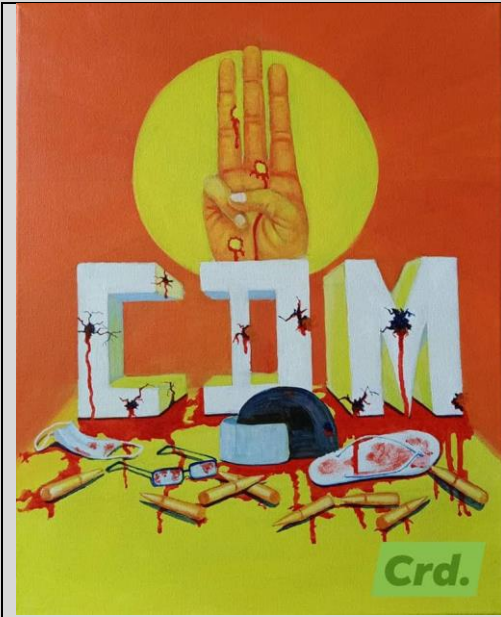
The Powerful and Meaningful Graffiti Art and Drawings

It is observed that just like music and poetry, graffiti art and other drawings give a clear picture of the protesters’ narrative of the situation and give us good understanding of the protest demands, and feeling or desire. It gives a powerful message to the general population and the political elites and left a testament to the protest itself even after the protesters were dispersed.

The countrywide mural decorations of roads with phrases such as “We Want Democracy,” “Join CDM,” and so on in many cities and towns became widespread from mid-February. In Hakha, a group of engineers painted a mural reading “We want democracy” on a road at Timit, located between Hakha and Thantlang, on 23 February 2021 when youth protesters in Hakha also wrote several words including “we want federal democracy,” “Join CDM,” “Reject Military Dictatorship” and so on roads in several locations in the city, and the security forces with the help of municipality erased many of those words on the night of 24 February (The Hakha Post, 2021) (Lian, 2021). The satellite captured some of those street paintings, including “We Want Democracy,” “We Need Democracy,” and “Free Our Leader”. The street paintings give a clear message about what protesters have been demanding (The Guardian, 2021).

A symbolic strike called a ‘bloody paint strike,’ on 14 April 2021, was also carried out in many cities and towns across the country. The protesters across the country painted bus stops, roads, walls and buildings with red colour while protesters on streets also carried placards words written in red colour or red placards to represent the blood of the hundreds of people who died or were injured during the security forces crackdown on protesters. All such activities, as they travel in cyberspace, will remain memorialized (Ng, 2021).

In Hakha, drawings were also showcased at public rallies and protesters let those travel in cyberspace. The following were just a few of them.



Note: the artist information not disclosed on request

The first draw with three-finger salutes, an acronym CDM referring to the civil disobedience movement and live bullets with signs of blood on a floor clearly illustrated a bloody crackdown on protesters by security forces using live bullets. The second and third paintings with traditional dress, an arrow and a bow, and a homemade rifle seemingly described an intended or ongoing armed resistance against the Myanmar military regime. In early April, Chinland Defense Force was founded and it carried out its first attack on the Myanmar military in late April 2021, reportedly killing more than a dozen Myanmar military soldiers (Radio Free Asia, 2021). Finally, the fourth painting named “Vaurawng Dohthlennak” can be translated as “Vaurawng Revolution” or “Spring Revolution”. Vaurawng is a flower that blossoms during the spring season. The word “Vaurawng Dohthlennak” possibly could aid protesters with emotional strength as it

decolonized the movement by using a traditional important element “Vaurawng” to describe what is happening in the Chin State. During a public rally in Hakha which the author himself also attended, an artist who painted “Vaurawng Revolution” said that the painting “Vaurawng Dohthlennak” word was chosen because the movement is happening during spring and Vaurawng is one of the most important flowers that tell the Chin people that the spring has come.

Artworks also illustrated the severity of the violent crackdowns of peaceful protests across the country. Within about six months since the 1 January coup, about 931 have been killed, 5,333 have been arrested, and 1,963 arrest warrants have been evaded by the military junta according to AAPP-Burma (AAPP 2021 July 23). The youths in Hakha, therefore, sometimes staged human-less protests through artworks such as erecting protest signs, photographs and slogans on banana trees, painting on the walls and streets in order to avoid brutal crackdown and arbitrary arrest.

Music and Poem in the Anti-coup Protest

It is believed that more than 5 songs in Hakha (Chin) language have been composed in Chin State since the 1 January coup by 30 April 2021, and some poems have been read during public rallies in Hakha. The content analysis of music and poems demonstrated that they bring back cultural memories in addition to denouncing the military coup, giving political messages and creating a sense of emotional connection.

<i>Dohthlennak Khuapau</i>	<i>Revolution Spring</i>
<i>Tlangsang cilio va</i>	<i>Cilio bird of the hill</i>
<i>Hal le ttam in fing kip cul</i>	<i>With hunger and starve, crossing hills to hills,</i>
<i>Cerhput haw nam nam.</i>	<i>Smell is the water-spring.</i>
<i>Seino tthangthar rual</i>	<i>Youths of the generation</i>
<i>Deihnak luatnak him vaang ruah</i>	<i>For peace, freedom and security</i>
<i>Nun hi maw thap hna</i>	<i>Risk their lives</i>
<i>Khuapau fing zil kik</i>	<i>The zephyr of spring</i>
<i>An biang cung thlan rak hner hram</i>	<i>gently blow their sweating face,</i>
<i>Marbang ziamh piak hna</i>	<i>Dry their sweat</i>
<i>sianghmu hmuah le hliam</i>	<i>Shun not gunpoint and wounds</i>
<i>Thinfang hlanh le chunh hrial lo</i>	<i>Or stabbing in to the hearts</i>
<i>Thaizing sertu hna</i>	<i>The creators of tomorrow</i>
<i>Biareithlep chawlno</i>	<i>The monsoon new leave</i>

<p><i>Nang hung corh tthan hram tuah</i> <i>Hi ram vawlei ah</i></p> <p>#hngerhtebawi</p>	<p><i>Ye grow again in this land.</i></p> <p>#By Hnerhter Bawi</p>
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<u><i>Khuapau Vanhla</i></u>	<u><i>The Heavenly Spring Song</i></u>
<p><i>Darlawi Darlawi!</i> <i>An tum i</i> <i>Vanhla kan sa lai</i> <i>Khuapau chuah cun ti'n</i> <i>Vaurawng le fiakfaiva nih an ti.</i> <i>Vaurawng cu a par cang</i> <i>Darlawi aw thang lo in</i> <i>Kuan le ʔah aw tu thang</i> <i>Hmanseh hi uknak chia hi</i> <i>lungual nak in kan tei hrim lai</i> <i>Cu ni tik ah "Vanhla" kan sa te lai.</i></p> <p><i>Victoria Sung</i> 13.3.21</p>	<p><i>Copper-flute Copper-flute!</i> <i>They will play the copper flute</i> <i>And we will sing the heavenly song,</i> <i>When the spring comes,</i> <i>Said Vaurawng* and Fiakfaiva**.</i> <i>Vaurawng has blossomed now!</i> <i>But silent is the copper-flute,</i> <i>Guns and crying made their sounds instead</i> <i>Nevertheless, Nevertheless this unjust rule,</i> <i>By unity, we shall win.</i> <i>On that day, we will sing "the Heavenly Song"</i></p> <p><i>Victoria Sung</i> 13.3.21</p>
<p><i>*Vaurawng is a flowering tree blossomed across the Chin hill ranges in the springtime</i> <i>**Fiakfaiva is a bird that sings at the beginning of the Springtime in Chinland</i></p>	

Songs of Protest

In a recent article reflecting on the music of the George Floyd protests in the US, Mariusz Kozak, Assistant Professor of Music at Columbia University, explained how “music functions as a social glue that binds the minds and bodies of those who create it”, thereby creating a unification of purpose which is key for the sustenance and success of social justice protests (Kozak, 2020). In Myanmar, several songs have been composed and were used during public rallies, including in Hakha, Chin State, the authors have observed.

Songs like “A Clear Freedom,” “We Shall Win,” “God, Stand with Us,” “Police Are Coming,” “The Revolution,” “Free from Fear,” and “A Victory Flag” all have been well shared among young people and protesters in Hakha. It is expected that more and more songs will be produced in the coming weeks and months. In addition to songs, young

people composed several poems, and some of them have been read during public rallies in Hakha.

Music and songs are employed especially during seat-in protest movements. Artists played a critical role by entertaining or encouraging the protesters through songs and music together with speeches during the protests. Moreover, many of those songs encouraged protesters while some were reportedly meant to deride the military. A song entitled “A Clear Freedom” goes as follow:

We need justice and peace, real justice. We need freedom, real freedom-- the freedom from fear. Young men and women, get up now for our land. There is no hope under this unjust rule. We are the hope of children and old people. We will fight; fight till we win - all these unjust rules. Let's unite and march forward for justice, for real freedom.

For genuine freedom, let us sacrifice even our precious lives. Lost in hope and pain in the heart. We beat our chests. How many people will have to pour out their blood to gain our freedom! Who would want to live a lifelong life under unjust rule? They act as they please. Young men and women do not forget this. This enemy is our enemy. Let us fight these terrorists. To protect our ancestral land is our duty. Let's fight together in unity. We, the youths of today, are leaders of today. We will leave a precious legacy for our future generations.

Many lives have been lost, even the lives of innocent children. Young men and women, use your strength, now is the time. Some of our friends do not return home forever. For our land we will fight, we will fight; fight till we win all these unjust rules. Let's unite and march forward for justice, for real freedom.

Conclusion

The case of Chin State demonstrated the artistic works as the major element of the anti-coup protest. It provides symbolic resources and contributes to social and political mobilization, and brings back memories that help enhance and frame social and political movements. Thus, considering the role of artistic works, including music and poems in analyzing social and political movements could significantly contribute to enriching the knowledge on the anti-coup protest, and indeed similar collection action.

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