

Literature in the Limelight: One symbol *Catching Fire* across South-East Asia

By Yasmin Turner

The Hunger Games' three-finger salute is being increasingly adopted across more South-East Asian countries to promote a shared pursuit of liberal democracy. I speak to Karen and Katy from Taiwan who discuss the recent events in Myanmar and the possibility of their own country faced with losing independence and democracy.

Remember the three-finger salute in Brownies, Guides, or Scouts? Or recognise it from *The Hunger Games* novels and movies?

Well, this symbol has become the prominent gesture for unity and resistance against authoritarian rule, shared throughout popular media. The latest use is found in Myanmar by nurses, Buddhist monks, students and other protesters.

On February 1, the military took control of Myanmar and detained the recently elected pro-democracy leader, Aung San Suu Kyi. Protesters took to the streets but have been confronted by police and military with live ammunition, tear gas and rubber bullets.

In response to these steps taken by the military, Karen, a nurse originally from Taiwan expresses, "Humans have the right to protest. Their job (the military's) is to protect citizens, not against them."

The recent events have caused our Prime Minister to release a statement on Twitter. This followed the comment of the UN special envoy for Myanmar, Christine Schraner Burgener, who confirmed: "the bloodiest day" occurred on February 3 when 38 people were killed.

Amidst the violence and imposed restrictions such as curfews, internet blackouts and the ban of Facebook in Myanmar, the three-finger gesture has risen once again. Borrowed from Suzanne Collins' literary works and film franchise *The Hunger Games*, the three-finger salute became popularized after Thailand's military seized power in 2014, at the same time the third *Hunger Games* film was released in cinemas. In the dystopian franchise, the salute is used as a courageous symbol of support against the Capitol, a totalitarian state that brutally represses the nation of fictional Panem.

Francis Lawrence, the director of three of the four *Hunger Games* films, told *The Sydney Morning Herald*: "It is sort of thrilling, that something that happens in the movie can become a symbol for people, for freedom or protest." Students were found buying tickets to the film and handing them out to the public as a form of protest. Film viewings were subsequently cancelled, and the salute banned.

Following the first use in Thailand's protests, the symbol spread and is used in Hong Kong in defiance of China's threat to their democracy. Just as the salute has been adopted in Hong Kong against Chinese military-backed government control and now Myanmar, it looks as though it won't be long until other South-East Asian countries follow suit. China is threatening Taiwan's independent status as it vows to retake what China calls a breakaway province, just as it did with Hong Kong.



Photograph: Jack Taylor/ AFP/Getty Images

When asked if Taiwan should be a part of China, Karen believes this would be a “negative move”. “Taiwan is considered a democratic country with free speech (social media, TV channels, multiple parties to help citizens monitor the ruling government), human rights and proper educations.” China threatens this with its single political party (the authoritarian Chinese Communist Party) and lack of freedom of speech.

Kaen believes there could be change coming for Taiwan: “I believe one day my country will become like what happened in Hong Kong.” The anti-authoritarian movement will continue to expand across borders as democracy is threatened.

Katy, a secondary school teacher living in Taiwan, recalls when Taiwan suffered from state oppression: “I know the 228 event in Taiwan when the government killed many protesters. My grandparents told me the story about it. They were furious and scared at that time.” On February 28, 1947, an anti-government uprising is estimated to have killed between 5,000 and 28,000 Taiwanese at the hands of the Kuomintang-led Republic of China government military.

Using global popular culture and literature to share struggles abroad is an important way to resonate with more people and prevent history repeating itself, such as the 228 massacre in Taiwan. The power of fiction is important, to draw attention to movements of social injustice, just as hashtags help spread the message online. The globally recognised symbol can provide understanding to us in the West as we realise what is happening in some South-East Asian countries shares similarity with the shocking scenes in *The Hunger Games*.



Photograph: Sakchai Lalit/ AP

If you're interested in finding out more about what's going on, I strongly suggest reading into the online movement Milk Tea Alliance, follow #MilkTeaAlliance. Intrigued? Head over to Twitter and have a look now! Spread the fire.

