

The 2019 Social Unrest: Revisiting the Pathway of Radicalization in Hong Kong from 2008 to 2012 – An Explorative Approach with General Strain Theory

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Abstract

Hong Kong has experienced an unprecedented social unrest since June 2019, triggered by the introduction of the Fugitive Offenders Amendment Bill by the government of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. Social unrest involves a tangle of interrelated questions, hence the article's purpose is to provide pioneer criminological perspective to explore and explain the causes and the evolution of right-wing radicalization in Hong Kong context from the year of 2008 to 2012 through the scope of Agnew's general strain theory. Previous researches mainly focused on the relationship between political factors and radicalization; therefore this study aims to revisit the birth and rise of right-wing radicalization in Hong Kong through the lens of socio-economic aspects. It has made a critical step to provide direction and consolidation for future analysis relating to the actual root causes of right-wing radicalization and social unrest in Hong Kong, as it

suggests that the element of high magnitude of stress caused by economic inequality, harsher living environment, degrading quality of life and the increasing socio-cultural tensions and radical right ideological infiltration had created a perfect atmosphere for radicalization and the spread of extremism. Therefore, the theory could be a useful theoretical framework to help researchers to conduct future studies relating to radicalization and social unrest in Hong Kong and to help policy-makers to formulate public policies that focus on addressing strain issues against local citizens.

Keywords: *criminology, general strain theory, strains, radicalization, social unrests, conflict studies*

1. Introduction and Background

Hong Kong has just experienced an unprecedented a year of internal conflict, which was first triggered by the Fugitive Offenders Amendment Bill proposed by the Government of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR). The Bill was about the amendment of the Fugitive Offenders Ordinance, so that it could apply to special surrender arrangements to particular circumstances not covered by current surrender arrangements of general nature. The introduction of the Bill resulted in widespread political-oriented criticisms from domestic and international community. The anti-Bill public sentiment reached the first climax on 9th June 2019, where the Civil Human Rights Front launched a demonstration marching en masse to the Government House and Legislative Council of HKSAR, which was finally estimated to have an attendance of 270,000 persons by the Hong Kong Police Force and 1.03 million persons claimed by the organizer. The nature of protest changed from “anti-Bill” to “anti-Hong Kong and Chinese Government” after 1st July 2019, where many political-motivated radical protesters

stormed into the Legislative Council Complex, defaced the Hong Kong emblem and presented the *Manifesto of Hong Kong Protesters* (香港人抗爭宣言), symbolically directly challenging the authority of the HKSAR Government and the sovereignty of the People's Republic of China (PRC).

The scale of protests and the use of violence escalated quickly as time passed due to continual aggressive and violent clashes between two sides – the Yellow (pro-protest camp) and the Blue (pro-HKSAR government, police and PRC). The Yellow adopted a so-called leaderless resistance and guerilla strategy to “blossom everywhere” (*The Guardian*, 13th October 2019), where protests and riots were randomly held in different areas in Hong Kong. In early March 2020, according to the police press conference held by the Police Chief, it was reported that the total number of arrestees relating to political protests reached around 7,500 with around 40 per cent of those being students (of which 60 per cent were from universities and 40 per cent from secondary schools); and more importantly, police discovered 11 cases of explosives from July 2019 to March 2020 with some cases being directly related to political agenda (*U.S. News & World Report*, 2nd March 2020).

Based on the observations, there is a large number of public commentaries by journalists, scholars, policy researchers, legislative councilors and government agencies raising concerns relating to the rise of political-oriented radicalization, radical right ideology among youth population, and the emerging right-wing violent radicalized secret groups (such as the black bloc, Raptor slayer team, Pink-Team etc.) and possibly early sign of domestic terrorism (*South China Morning Post*, 5th February 2020; Anadolu Agency, 30th October 2019; Lo, 2019; McLaughlin, 2019). After months of social unrests, the Chief Executive of HKSAR Government planned to set up a joint-hand ad hoc independent review committee consisted of both civil and official members to study

the cultural, socio-political causes and factors that motivated people taking part in the unrests, and provide solution and method of prevention. In fact, the Chief Executive would take reference from the Riots, Communities and Victims Panel and the Riot Roundtables established by the U.K. government after the 2011 London Riots.

2. Purpose and Methods

Social unrest and radicalization involves a tangle of interrelated questions, including the psychological, cultural, historical, political and socio-economic aspects, especially that the 2019 anti-Bill social unrest was imaged with a massive wave of radical right activities. Consequently, the society and government need references and directions to effectively study the hidden and profound internal and external causes, catalysts and relevant factors that significantly fueled tensions and stresses, so that they can formulate effective policies for conflict resolutions and future preventions.

Referencing prior studies and observations, the rapid rise of radical right movement started from 2009 to 2012, which was a period when public confidences and trusts in domestic government performances (in improving people's livelihood and maintaining economic performance) and political constitutional system ("One Country, Two Systems") deteriorated significantly (Centre for Communication and Public Opinion Survey, CUHK, 2016; HKUPOP, 2018). Small group of local citizens and social groups started turning to "radical right" with a strong sense of local self-protective mentality (which is also known as "localism"), particularly the younger generation (Chan, 2016; Kaeding, 2017; Kwong, 2016; Lee, 2016; Ma, 2015). Several identical localist protests emerged from social media mainly from *Facebook* in 2010.

The sharp deterioration of governance legitimacy and the rise of radical right groups (localist group) had triggered scholars' attentions. Previous radical right studies of Hong Kong provided very comprehensive and detailed explanations through the scope of political studies. They mainly studied how political changes led to civil disobedience and political instability, for instance: Dapiran (2017) explained how the city's long history of civil disobediences and political insecurities led to domestic radical right movements; Veg (2017) studied how the civic identity and Chinese politics in post-handover Hong Kong triggered a strong defensive political and cultural sense for localism; Kaeding (2017) explained how the hardcore governing style of HKSAR Government and Chinese authorities fueled anti-government sentiments and helped localists gain support from the public; Kwong (2016) studied the characteristics of key localist organizations in Hong Kong and explained how the political factors from Chinese authorities had significant impacts on localism; Ma (2015) explained the causes of localism in a border perspective, by covering the aspect of socio-political and cultural factors that had contributed to the birth of localism in Hong Kong.

Those studies had made clear explanations about the rise of localism; yet they had limitations. The first critical problem is that they had made a relatively causal connection between the rise of radical right movement and the political atmosphere, especially those studies that were conducted after the Occupy Central Movement in 2014. Other limitations are mainly that (1) the scope of their studies was too limited on political aspect and there was a lack of theoretical supports; (2) they were not able to provide a comprehensive explanation about how different aspects were interconnected with each other and (3) they were not able to explain why individuals would choose that particular radical

coping manners (radicalization) that might sometimes involve serious deviant behaviors like crimes and violence.

Studying radicalization and social unrest involves a mix of sophisticated questions. In this article, I suggest that General Strain Theory (GST) could serve as a key groundwork to start reviewing and identifying causes of social unrests and radicalization in Hong Kong from a criminological strain perspective. In this case, the purpose is to capture macro-level societal changes, and to serve as a qualitative pioneer study to try to develop a set of exploratory hypotheses about the determinants of socio-economic strains and grievances with the scope of criminology theoretical framework of GST. The article firstly explains the concept and general principle of GST, then secondly explains how it could apply to explain extremism and radicalization, and thirdly reviews when, what and how a variety of factors contribute to the rise and evolution of right wing radicalized groups from 2008 to 2019. For the sake of effectively capturing the full picture, I apply a qualitative research that includes (1) historical research – employing the technique of discourse and content data analysis that are mainly collected from past documents and researches, and (2) naturalistic observation – where researcher only observes and records the evolution of society's ecology.

3. Literature Reviews

3.1. Strain Theory

The classic Strain Theory introduced by Robert K. Merton argues that deviances and crimes could be a result of strains created by anomie and blockage of goal-seeking behaviors (Merton, 1938). He believed that the lower class was more likely to face anomie when there was a disconnect between the culturally identified goals (mainly focusing on the monetary success or middle-class status) and the legitimate means to achieve

them. Deviances would occur if there are not enough legitimate cultural means and opportunities for people to achieve the socio-culturally identified goals. This theory in 1930s gained popularity in its early beginning and middle stage, as it provided a pioneer socio-criminological theoretical framework for social scientists to study the social phenomena of deviances and crimes in the United States through a society's class structure, economic activities and cultural background on a macroscopic level (Agnew, 1985). However, after years of testing and examinations, it suffered from a large number of criticisms and skepticisms in late 20th century because of its weak empirical supports between social class and criminality, weak and failed explanation on juvenile delinquency, and faced competition with newer theories mainly the control and social learning (Agnew, 1992; Cole, 1975; Tittle and Smith, 1978; Hirschi, 1969; Rosenfeld, 1989; Johnson, 1979).

Strain theory enjoyed a new development after Robert Agnew revised the Merton's Strain Theory in 1985 via building a relationship between negative emotions of stress and delinquency based on a national survey of adolescent boys conducted by the Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan. Subsequently, he developed the GST in 1992. It adheres to the groundwork of Merton's Strain Theory, but proposed a different explanation for crime causation. It argues that the major crime causation is not so much relating to the "inability to achieve positively valued goals", but the "inability to escape from painful or aversive conditions" (Agnew, 1985). Strains could be *objective* (events and conditions disliked by most people in a given group) and *subjective* (events and conditions disliked by a particular person experiencing them) in which people are more likely to engage in delinquency because they experience certain strains or grievances that produce negative emotions like anger, frustration and hate (Agnew, 1992; 2012).

He identified a total of three types of strain: (1) *strain as the actual or anticipated failure to achieve positively valued goals*, (2) *strain as the actual or anticipated removal of positively valued stimuli*, and (3) *strain as the actual or anticipated presentation of negatively valued stimuli*. For individuals facing stresses criminal behavior could be one of the possible reactive and corrective actions, as it could be used to (1) reduce or escape from strains, (2) seek revenge against the source of strains and related targets, and (3) to alleviate negative emotions (Agnew, 2002; 2015).

Agnew's work helps strain theory to regain a credible position and a significant amount of academic attention, hence to become a more accurate and applicable version for crime study by overcoming criticisms of previous strain theories (e.g., Agnew, 2012; Broidy, 2001; Froggio, 2007). In fact, nowadays, it is still being applied by scholars from different cultural backgrounds and countries for studying how stressors contribute to crime and deviant behaviors (e.g., Agnew, 2015; Bishopp, Piquero, Worrall and Piquero, 2017; Orak and Solakoglu, 2017; Barrera, Gaga-a and Pabayos, 2016; Paez, 2018).

3.2 Strains, Radicalization and Terrorism

As mentioned in the first section, the 2019 social unrests in Hong Kong have brought the attention about the radicalization. Before heading to later section, it is necessary to understand the basic principle of "radicalization", and why criminological perspective GST could be a good tool to study the social unrests and the rise of radicalization and political-oriented radical groups.

Radicalization is a sophisticated topic mixed with multi-disciplinary subjects including sociology, criminology, psychology, political and security studies. During the early stage of radicalization study, it, in most cases, was part of the field of terrorism, extremism and political violence

that were originated in political science, psychology and economic field (Agnew, 2010; Freilich and LaFree, 2015). Although it has been widely used by media, officials and academic studies after the 9-11 attacks, there is still no universal acceptable definition and it is still suffering from criticisms on definitional, conceptual and empirical ground (Schuurman and Taylor, 2018). It is not the article's intention to study its definition in depth, but I decide to adopt its current most common interpretation, which is a *changing process of psychological, physical or ideological conditions which might lead to involvement in terrorism* (Pauwels *et al.*, 2014; Borum, 2011; Kundnani, 2012; Klausen *et al.*, 2015; Schuurman and Taylor, 2018).

Terrorism is a form of crime with a strong ideological and political agenda in all essential aspects (Clarke and Newman, 2006; Borum, 2004). Scholars had been trying to solve questions about how criminological perspective could apply in terrorism study. Some neoclassical criminological theories are being cited to study radicalization and terrorism, such as routine activity theory, rational choice theory and situational crime prevention theory (e.g. Freilich and LaFree, 2015; Rosenfeld, 2002; Rausch and LaFree, 2007). Yet, the number and the scope of criminological terrorism study were still limited, especially given that some scholars had argued that there was a major difference about the *intention* between criminals and radicalized violent extremists.

Criminals commit crimes for personal gains and benefits; in contrast, politically motivated perpetrators commit crimes for greater political, social and ideological good of some wider constituency (LaFree, Dugan and Miller, 2015; Jasko, LaFree and Kruglanski, 2017; Jenkins, 2007; Nassar, 2005). They would develop an internal moral justification for violence by disengaging and replacing the existing moral, legal and religious standards. Criminals in contrast will rarely

advance to this psychological stage (Aly, Taylor and Karnovsky, 2014; LaFree and Ackerman, 2009). But they both *de facto* have a fundamental similarity: ordinary crime and political violence are both *social constructions* that derive meanings from interactions that produce *rules and norms* through undermining social trust; hence meaning that criminological perspective and theoretical framework is particularly potentially useful for studying the characteristics and motivations of these radicals.

Back to strain theory, Merton's classic strain theory to certain extent had touched on the terrorism field. The model of five mode of adaptation suggested that the mode of rebellion would occur if large number of individuals ignored the socio-cultural goals and legitimate means and meanwhile intends to create a "new order", which could lead to anti-government social unrest or revolution. Winfree and Abadinsky (2003) stated that rebellion is the greatest challenge to an established and normative society since it is the most threatening reaction from the individuals. Featherstone and Deflem (2003) also explains that "rebellion" often involves acts of resistance to or open outright rejection of established system, and is actively substituted with a new ideology, replacing the current societal norms. The factor of substituting with a new ideology is not the main threat to social stability. What makes them so dangerous is its inherently violent nature against conformity, such as destruction of property, disrupting public order and safety, unlawful acts that are employed for the sake of achieving their objectives. Therefore, radicalized groups are, in most cases, categorized as a type of rebellion (Brown, Esbensen and Geis, 2015).

The GST serves another function. It enjoys strong empirical supports about the correlation between strains and crimes. However, scholars had not yet fully explored how GST could apply in radicalization studies during 2000s until Robert Agnew published a

work named *A general strain theory of terrorism* in 2010 that became an essential work presenting a cross-subject integrated theoretical framework of general strain theory of terrorism by studying similarities of criminal behaviors and terrorism, reviewing the defects of strain-based terrorism explanations and exploring the feasibility of integrating GST and terrorism study (Agnew, 2010).

Agnew found out that previous strain-based terrorism studies were not able to (1) effectively identify the essential characteristic of strain most likely to result in terrorism, (2) fully explain the rationale of resulting in terrorism, and (3) explain the critical factors causing small percentage of strain victims turn to terrorism. The strains concept advocated by the GST could well fit into these defects, because it could explain how these strains (1) reduce social control, (2) provide models for and foster beliefs favorable to extremism and terrorism, and (3) foster a collective orientation and *problem-solving* response. The experience of prolonged exposure and suffering from a deemed injustice and high magnitude *collective* strains and grievances against individuals or social groups is a *sine qua non* for individuals to endorse, embrace and adopt violence on behalf of a group or ideology. *Collective* strains could be political conflicts, wars, or socio-economic pressures that lead to deprivation in living standards and environment (Agnew, 2010; Freis-Beattie, 2013; LaFree and Ackerman, 2009; Post, 2007).

Agnew had successfully brought a way forward about the intersection of negative emotions and the etiology of terrorism, and conceptualized the influences of strain on support for violent radicalization. Later on, some studies showed that GST to certain extent is able to explain the relationship among strains, radicalization and terrorism. For instance, Al-Badayneh, Alshawi and Alhasan (2017) studied the relationship between strains and youth radicalization among Syrian refugees in Jordan, and the result showed that societal causes like

lack of feeling equity, low life satisfaction and life stress events do have a positive relationship with youth radicalization. Notably, Campelo *et al.* (2018) had conducted a systematic review with a total of 22 pieces of qualitative and quantitative papers, for the purpose of deciphering the major causes of aged-12 to -25 European youth radicalization. The result reflected that individual risk factors (low social control, perceived injustice and uncertainty), micro-environment risk factors (family dysfunction and engagement with radicalized individuals and social groups) and societal risk factors (anomie caused by political events and societal changes) could be causes of youth radicalization.

In the nutshell, Agnew suggests that GST's theoretical framework and concept is not limited to studying crime issue, but also able to apply to radicalization and terrorism studies. His argument currently has earned support from recent studies, where there are a large number of researches suggesting that strains could be one of the major reasons of resulting radicalization.

4. Hong Kong Context

4.1 Collective Objective Strains from Socio-economic Aspect

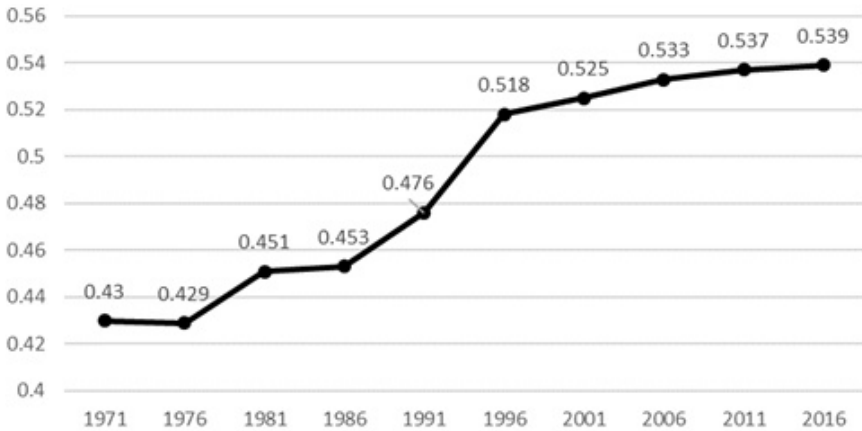
Economic strain refers to a situation measured by how difficult those individuals feel to live on their current income (Whelan *et al.*, 2001). Previous studies suggested that economically stressed people are more likely to have a weaker social cohesion and stronger sense of social fragmentation (Merton, 1938; Hagerty, 1999; Hedström, 2005; Andrews, Jilke and Walle, 2014). In fact, prior researches argued that there is a positive relationship between deviances and economic inequality (Kayaoglu, 2010; Post, 2007). It could bring a serious damage against the legitimacy of the ruling regime and the authority of existing governors that led to civil wars and insurgencies in a serious sense or

led to sudden uprising of racial groups (Post, 2007; United Nations Development Programme, 2004).

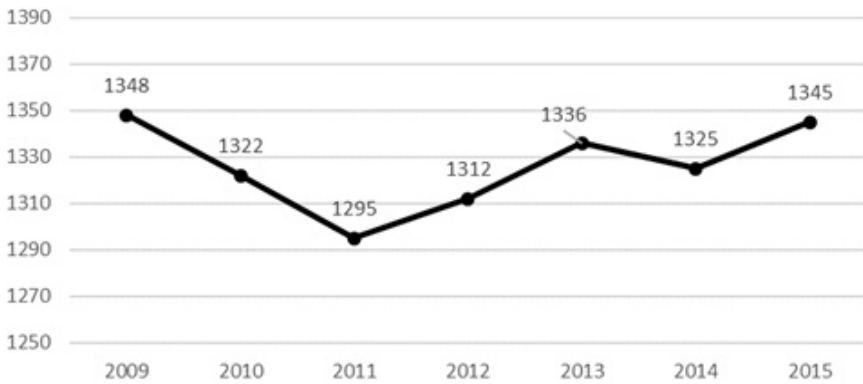
Regarding the Hong Kong case study, it in general was a more economically developed region, where the economy was highly developed as a *laissez-faire* economy with highest degree of economic freedom due to the constitutional principle of low taxation, free-trade and international financial market (Gittings, 2016; The Heritage Foundation, 2019). However, the poverty rate, Gini coefficient, salary income level and living quality in contrast all reflected an opposite story. Lee, Wong and Law (2007) witnessed Hong Kong as facing increasing inequalities of income, job opportunities and job securities, and turning into a “divided” or “dual” city.

The economic inequality was an emerging serious problem for Hong Kong, as a great variety of factors ranged from household conditions, government policies and even the economic model all had significant contribution to it (Wong, 2017). In fact, wealth inequality in Hong Kong was greater than any more economically developed regions or countries, like U.K., Singapore, U.S. etc. (Henrard, 2011; Oxfam, 2018). Even though Hong Kong had experienced a 50 per cent GDP growth from 2000 to 2010 with an extraordinarily high level of government’s reserves by world standards, the issue was never eased or addressed properly.

Citing as a reference the Gini index, which is a simple measure of the distribution of income that condenses the entire income distribution for a place, Hong Kong was under 0.45 before 1990s, broke through in 1991 reaching 0.476 and later on jumped to 0.518 in 1996. After the Handover in 1997, the index kept rising steadily to 0.525 (2001), 0.533 (2006), 0.537 (2011) and finally 0.539 in 2016 (Census and Statistic Department, Government of the HKSAR, 2019), meaning that the inequality hit the historically highest.

Figure 1 Gini Coefficients of Household Income Inequality, 1976–2011

The statistic of poverty population reflected an uncomfortable phenomenon as well. The Census and Statistics Department of HKSAR government started carrying out poverty research in 2009. It defined poverty population with the concept of “relative poverty”, with household income before policy intervention (i.e. removing the impact of taxation and cash transfer) as the basis for measurement, and setting the main poverty line at 50 per cent of median household income by household size (Census and Statistic Department, Government of the HKSAR, 2013). The poverty population started from 1,348,000 persons in 2009 that was nearly 20 per cent of the total population; then experienced a small decline down to 1,322,000 in 2010 and 1,295,000 in 2011. The number hit the highest during that period because of the economic recession in 2008 that had hit the economy badly. The following two years of decreased number could be the result of economy recovery, but the poverty percentage of the total population was still staying nearly at 20 per cent with no significant improvement. It started rising again in 2012 and finally reached 1,345,000 in 2015 (Figure 2).

Figure 2 The Total Number of Poor Population ('000), 2009–2018

Furthermore, the average income of younger generation with higher education did suffer from salary deduction and worsening working experience. According to the “Comparative Research Report on the Salary Income among Generations of University Graduate in Hong Kong” by New Youth Forum in 2015, it had made a comprehensive study of salary level of university graduate level workers by reviewing all official reports relating to the income level of university graduate in Hong Kong from 1993 to 2013. It found out that the quality of employment, job opportunities and upward mobility had worsened during the 20-year period from 1993 to 2013. For instance, the average starting income level of a fresh university graduate had dropped from HK\$13,158 in 1993 to HK\$10,860 in 2013 (17 per cent of reduction), and the total number of graduates engaging in low-skill and labor-intensive jobs had increased 7.3 times from 18,100 persons (who account for 9 per cent of the total percentage of all workers with university education) to 131,600 in 2013 (14.6 per cent).

The aforementioned objective figures displayed a negative side of the Hong Kong economy. The question of how individuals *perceived*

those objective economic strains was also essential to determine whether they brought negative impact on their feelings. The Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups had studied how a socio-economic situation brought impacts against them in 2009 – a year after the financial tsunami hit in 2008, it found out that 19.7 per cent of survey respondents suffered from lost confidence, 15.9 per cent expressed increased mental pressure because of the direct result of economic hardship.

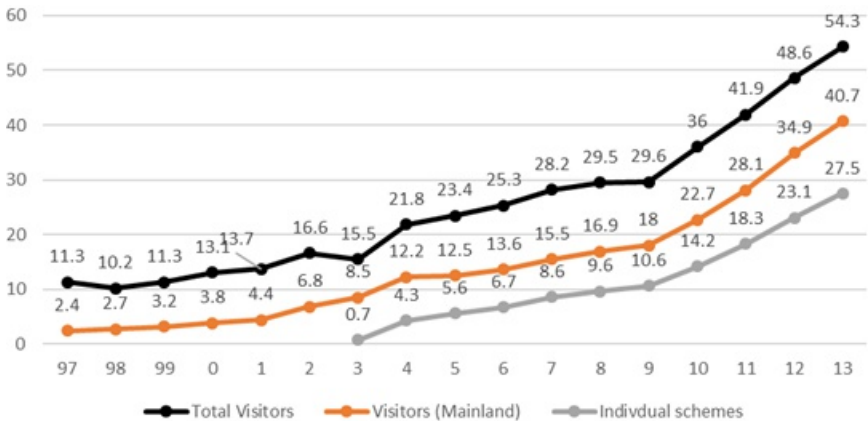
These phenomena reflected that those situations had increased the financial pressure against the younger generation and working class, hence affected their financial safety and security. Under such pressures, they cried out for government's social welfare intervention to help them to reduce stresses. Yet, prior social and policy studies pointed out that the HKSAR government did too little on social policy to offset the growing inequalities because of its capitalist and *lassie-faire* mindset. It had relatively low public spending on enhancing social welfare policies, weak labor and welfare protections and late policy responses to help people to improve employment quality, meaning that the government had failed to meet the public requirements (Henrard, 2011).

Apart from the economic aspect, collective social strains could also be deemed as an essential factor of positive stimuli removals and negative stimuli inputs (Agnew, 2010; Freis-Beattie, 2013; LaFree and Ackerman, 2009; Post, 2007). After the 2008 economic recession, the Chinese Central Government enacted a travel policy named Multiple-entry Permits, in which it allowed Shenzhen (深圳) *hukou* (户口) residents to visit Hong Kong without travel limitation by eliminating travel barriers. The HKSAR government also free up more quota for the Individual Scheme for the purpose of recovering the economy through tourist industry.

Those policies led to a significant increase of the total number of visitors, especially from the mainland China. It increased from 29.5

million in 2008 to 36 million in 2010, and subsequently hit 60.8 million in 2014. According to Euromonitor International’s Top City Destination Ranking, Hong Kong’s position was ranked no. 9 in 2008 before the effects from Multiple Visit Scheme, jumped up to no. 1 in 2010, and became the most visited city destination afterwards for 9 years (Euromonitor, 2019). However, the tourist-based policies that led to robust tourist growth had received wide-spread criticisms and were being known as a “double-edge sword”. Despite the fact that it did bring economic benefits (Jang, 2011), it generated huge pressure against domestic social and physical carrying capacity (*South China Morning Post*, 8th September 2012; So, 2015).

Figure 3 Total Number of Visitors to Hong Kong, Visitors from the Mainland China and Individual schemes



The controversy over the balance between social and tourism development can be readily understood under the umbrella of tourism studies. The crucial problems caused by over-tourism could be well reflected by some notable examples like London (U.K.), Rome and Venice (Italy), Hawaii (U.S.), etc. They all share similarities of over-capacity issues, which raised debate about the balance between economic benefits and social costs. The overcapacity would also lead to confrontation between the local citizens and incoming visitors. Same as other cities, the influx of visitors from the mainland China to Hong Kong had brought tremendous change on the landscape of domestic tourism, community and economic activities (Rowen, 2016; Shen, Li, Luo and Chau, 2017; Siu, Lee and Leung, 2013), especially while there was a complicated socio-political and cultural fabric between Hong Kong and the mainland China about the political and ideological constitutional system relating to the identity of Hong Kongers vs mainland Chinese (Shen, Li, Luo and Chau, 2017; Zhang, Heung and Yan, 2009).

The increasing social integration had brought cultural shock against local residents. In fact, the mainland visitors were frequently depicted with negative perceptions and sentiments, which resulted in increasing tensions between local citizens in Hong Kong and the mainland visitors (Rowen, 2016). There were three noteworthy social incidents that had fueled the turmoil, which are respectively the “anchor babies” (or “maternity tourism”), “D&G photo shooting controversy” and “parallel trading”.

“*Anchor babies*” or “*maternity tourism*” (雙非嬰兒) – it was a phenomenon where mainland pregnant women gave birth in Hong Kong in order to gain the citizenship of Hong Kong. Its origin could be trace back to the Individual Visit Scheme implemented in 2003. The scheme provides a legitimate means to mainland pregnant visitors to give birth

to their infants in Hong Kong. It became an organized commercial business centered on getting them into Hong Kong to give birth, so that they could enjoy the right of abode and other social welfare benefits like education, medical service protections and HKSAR passports' traveling privilege; hence those infants are being known as the "anchor babies" (meaning that the infants' father and mother are not permanent Hong Kong residents).

In 2012, there are approximately 30,000 anchor and half-anchor babies born in Hong Kong, whose mothers being almost 30 per cent of the total fertility population in Hong Kong (*Ta Kung Pao*, 17th December 2013). In the following year 2013, the primary school places, especially the North District Hong Kong (北區) that shared geographic border with the mainland China, were insufficient for local parents due to the sharp increased in applications from anchor children.

"D&G photo shooting controversy" – a well-known local and international news - Dolce & Gabbana photo shooting controversy that occurred on 5th January 2012 was another trigger point. A Dolce and Gabbana security guard had stopped a Hong Kong photographer taking pictures of its shopfront from the pavement outside by telling him to "get lost" and only mainland visitors were allowed to take picture of Hong Kong D&G storefront. *Apple Daily* reported with a provoking message in a news headline: *only Hong Kong citizens were not allowed to take pictures of Dolce & Gabbana window displays in Hong Kong fashion outlets, but the mainland tourists were free to take pictures.*

Following the media reports, there was a demonstration by a hundred citizens and photographers who rallied right outside the store, protesting against the D&G's discrimination and more importantly, expressing their anger against the disruptions caused by mainland tourists. It subsequently resulted in direct physical and verbal conflicts between Hong Kong citizens and mainland visitors. This incident

became a notable case, accelerating confrontation from a daily interaction level to a cultural identity level. The controversy had gained international news coverage such as News Limited (Australia), *The Sunday Times* (UK), *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Wall street Journal* etc.

“*Border Parallel-Trading*” (水貨客) – it was a phenomenon of mainland traders exploiting advantage of multiple entry visa policy to import goods from Hong Kong to the mainland China. It led to problems of household daily necessities shortages and rapid inflation, public area over-congestions, local infrastructure capacity being overloaded and social disruption and disturbances against local residents in North District (Laidler and Lee, 2015). It subsequently expanded to other residential areas in the New Territories (新界), mainly Tuen Mun (屯門), Yeun Long (元朗), Taipo (大埔) and Shatin (沙田).

All these social phenomena and incidents intensified social hostilities between Hong Kong and the mainland China. They marked the penetration of the conflicts from the cultural aspect to that of social living quality. While local citizens were suffering from the economic hardship caused by the global macroscopic environment, the over-tourism problem became *the straw that broke the camel's back*. The high magnitude of stresses and emotions like anger and frustration could be clearly reflected in Hong Kong's public outcry, complaining about the negative impacts from the mainland tourists by portraying them as resource marauders or “locusts” (蝗蟲) and the HKSAR government's failed governance (Ma, 2015; Ong and Lin, 2017; Sautman and Yan, 2015).

The residential area of the North District of Hong Kong's New Territories (a district populated with ageing and grass-root population) was a remarkable example for showing how locals suffered from the hardest hit from the influx of Chinese visitors, maternity tourism and parallel trading since 2009. A research named “A Study on the Influence

of Mainland Individual Visitor and Parallel Trading on North District and the Future Development Direction in North District” conducted by North District Council in 2013 interviewed 700 local residents and 100 local commercial shops and compared commodity prices with other districts, studying the *de facto* effects of the above-mentioned situation.

Local residents experienced strong negative emotion of strains and pressures caused by daily disruptions and price inflation; 82 per cent respondents believed that the influx led to domestic inflation, shortage of commodity goods (80 per cent) and community hygienic issue (76 per cent). In fact, the study found out that the influx objectively brought negative effects on local economic activities, in which average commodity price was inflated significantly by nearly 10 per cent when comparing with other districts.

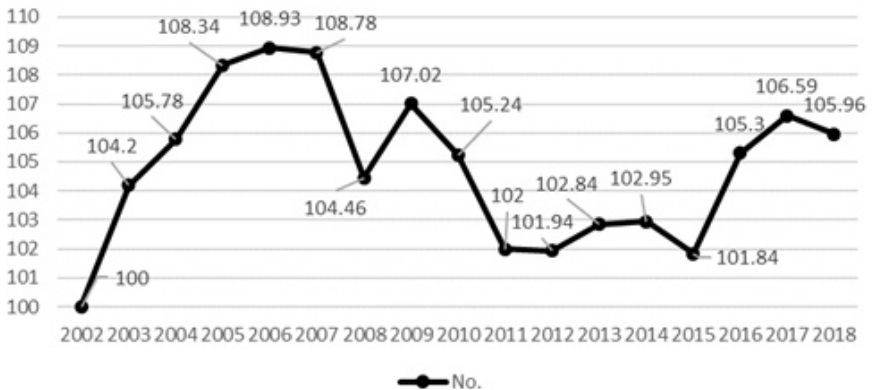
As described above, grievance is one of the major factors that led to right-wing radicalization. This hypothesis might seem applicable to Hong Kong situation as well. A 21-year-old local resident formed a networked-based local social groups named North District Parallel Imports Concern Group (北區水貨客關注組) in October 2012, called for social demonstration against parallel traders on social network, and received over 350 persons’ support and engagement. It emerged directly in relation to issues caused by mainland visitors with the spirit of “liberating” North District. It organized a series of localist “liberate” (光復) protests from October 2012 to July 2013, physically confronting mainland visitors and parallel traders. It represented the first semi-radical localist demonstration with a strong and iconic ideological symbol of “liberation” that was in touch with confrontation between “locals” and “mainlanders”.

Moreover, the index of living quality could be a useful reference to reflect the general satisfaction of a society’s condition. The Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies’ Centre for Quality of Life at the

Chinese University of Hong Kong has been managing the CUHK Hong Kong Quality of Life Index since 2008. The index consists of 23 indicators that are grouped into 5 categories (health, social, culture and leisure, economic and environmental). The higher the indicator scores, the better it performs. The value of this survey study is that the score was calculated based on telephone surveys. In that sense, the data could effectively reflect public perception on the changes of quality of life.

It shows that the overall score of quality of life index hit the climax in 2007, but suffered a sharp drop to 104.46 in 2008 because of the recession hit. Although it climbed up back to 107.02 in 2009, the index suffered a sharp drop in 2010 and 2011 afterwards and stayed at an extreme low level from 2010 to 2016. In other words, it is in line with the abovementioned analysis.

Figure 4 CUHK Hong Kong Quality of Life Index, 2008–2018



4.2. Socio-economic Objective Strains Mixed with Radical Right Ideological that Echoed with Grievances

Studies suggested that ideological narratives played a critical part in the radicalization process, as it would bring profound impacts on individuals' physical and psychological behaviors (Pauwels *et al.*, 2014; Borum, 2011; Campelo *et al.*, 2018; Kundnani, 2012; Klausen *et al.*, 2015; Schuurman and Taylor, 2018). While highly stressed persons may not have associated themselves with an ideology, they would likely choose path of delinquency; notably, if this conviction came into contact with any kind of appealing strong ideology, they could easily take the path of radicalization (Campelo *et al.*, 2018). Ideological narratives and themes are almost always present in the production of radicalized individuals. They could be interpreted as political beliefs about the world, affecting how individuals view and perceive the surrounding objective environment with a particular set of philosophies.

The National Security Criminal Investigations of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police provides a clearer definition, which is “the process by which individuals — usually young people — are introduced to an overtly ideological message and belief system that encourages movement from moderate, mainstream beliefs towards extreme views” (National Security Criminal Investigations, RCMP, 2009). Radical thinking is not necessarily a problem *per se*, as it encourages the individuals to physically engage in some actions to achieve the objectives advocated by the ideological message. On the contrary, it only becomes problematic or dangerous when the person promotes his radicalized thoughts (including political, social, or religious ideals etc.) via the illegal, violence or other unlawful direct aggressive action (Bartlett, Birdwell and King, 2010). In other words. it played several critical functions in radicalization: encouraging individuals to question the legitimacy of the prevailing order, helping individuals to diminish

fatalism by forging a new rebellious identity that gives meaning to acts of personal risk and to legitimize his own radical action by labelling the status quo as problematic, unjust and oppressive (Hafez and Mullins, 2015; Sedgwick, 2007).

While Hong Kong was suffering from socio-economic strains, the abovementioned statistics and situation reflected that the general public was filled with negative sentiments. A Hong Kong scholar named Dr. Chin Wan-kan (陳云根), who is currently referred to as the godfather (國師) of localism in Hong Kong, had published a book *On the Hong Kong City-State* (香港城邦論) in 2011 (and others on the same theme in a series from 2014 to 2016), which is best known as the first ideological advocacy about the contemporary theory of radical localism of Hong Kong. It has provided a very argumentative framework of the Hong Kong City-State model, which was being adopted by a majority of radical right groups and activities in Hong Kong; thus it is necessary to review its concepts.

Cheung (2015) had done a comprehensive academic review on Chin's City-State theory through an analysis basing on nationalism theories with specifically focus on Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* and theories on American nativism. He found out that Chin, in general, had an extremely skeptical view and perspectives on the political future of Hong Kong, Chinese political system, Chinese democratization process, the current impacts on Hong Kong caused by the public and economic policies and the conflicts between people of Hong Kong and the mainland people. He believes that what makes Chin's City-State theory so distinctive was because it was the first detailed structural political ideological work on promoting Hong Kong nationalism with the elements of anti-mainland xenophobia.

Chin's theory promoted the idea of self-rule and autonomy with the formation of a superior "Hong Konger" cultural identity and ethnic

consciousness by combining ideas of nativism and anti-immigrant nationalism that involves a total rejection of connection with the mainland and intense opposition and limited tolerance against mainlanders (Veg, 2017). To certain extent, it could be seen as a means of political and ideological propaganda and manifesto, a new strong localist nativism against the traditional pan-Chinese (大中華) cultural nationalism, and in effect an inspirational context for the current and potential followers disseminating his main theories to a large audience.

Those incidents during the eventful years of 2009 to 2012 – the economic hardship, the rapid increase in conflicts between the mainland visitors and Hong Kong citizens, the issues of anchor babies, parallel trading, D&G controversy, the theory of “locusts” – became push factors of enhancing the popularity of localism and intensifying the anti-mainlander sentiments. Those incidents did not only damage the relationship between the Hong Kong public and mainlanders, but it in effect had also reinforced Chin’s radical theory and enhanced public support for radical right parties.

Chin’s ideology had attracted a wide range of people as they gained an echo from his theory due to the frustration stemming from the rising economic stresses and inequalities, increasing cost of living and the degradation of living quality that were perceived to be linked to the influx of Chinese capital and hot money (Veg, 2017; Wong, 2015). A number of radical right literatures, publications and localist political leaders developed a more radical political ideological version – Hong Kong independence – based on the theoretical foundation of Chin’s City-State theory. These kinds of radical right ideologies were particularly and hugely popular among the younger generation (Cheung, 2015; Hung, 2014; Veg, 2017).

As stated in the previous section, radicalization is a changing process that in most cases involves an overtly ideological message and

belief system that encourages movement from moderate, mainstream beliefs towards extreme views. Chin's theory had a similar effect as well. The socio-economic situation provided a suitable background; hence it successfully became an overtly ideological and belief system that could turn people from conformity to a more rebellious manner, and brought about a shift in public focus from socio-economic hardship to confrontation between cultural and political identity of Hong Kongers and that of the mainland Chinese.

The most typical example is the Hong Kong City State Autonomous Movement (香港城邦自治運動). It was a pioneer of contemporary localist movement that emerged in 2011, and was run on the basis of the City-state theory. Another typical example is a radical right group Hongkongers Priority (香港人優先) formed in 2013 that promoted Hong Kong independence (which is also deep-rooted in Chin's theory) and challenged the principle of "One Country, Two Systems" and the Chinese authority. In December 2013 its members stormed into the Chinese People's Liberation Army Forces Hong Kong Building's area carrying the British-ruled Hong Kong flag to express their political agenda.

5. Discussion

A destructive social unrest is a cumulative effect for a long time period. After nearly a year of social unrests, community stakeholders and the government are trying to study and investigate the cultural, socio-political causes and factors that motivate people to take part in the unrests and radical right movements. When reviewing the causes of radicalization in Hong Kong, the majority of prior studies had focused on the political aspect, such as explaining how the hardcore approaches executed by the Chinese Central Government had fueled grievances in

the local society against it, the ideological gaps between younger generation and pro-establishment camps and government etc. They had made huge efforts and contribution on political explanations, but did not sufficiently cover the spectrum of socio-economic aspect and explain how and why people have chosen to become radical. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to put aside the political aspect and to fill up the missing puzzle of the entire picture by capturing macro-level societal change. It serves as a qualitative study to try to develop a set of exploratory hypotheses about the determinants of political violence via providing a comprehensive analysis on the socio-economic situation and radicalization phenomenon in Hong Kong during the period of 2008 to 2012.

The article suggests that the GST concept of strains is suitable to apply on the case study of radical right movement in Hong Kong. Collective strains caused by economic inequality played a major part in creating negative stimuli for members of society. Despite the gross domestic product (GDP) having increased significantly, the Gini coefficient hit the most serious level during that period; hence the number of poverty population was kept in a high percentage, where 20 per cent of the total population was living in poverty. The less privileged people, especially the younger generation, experienced a profound subjective feeling of degradation of living quality and drop of salary income. These phenomena reflected that those situations had increased financial pressures against the younger generation and the working class, hence affected their financial safety and security.

These negative feelings encouraged the underprivileged individuals to view the current condition as being unjust and unfair, inflaming them with the feeling of grievances. The abovementioned socio-economic situations worked like a nutrient to fuel the public sentiment of dissatisfaction and anger and to create societal collective strains. Indeed,

citizens in countries with higher levels of economic inequality expressed more negative attitudes and distrusts toward the authority and legitimacy of public institutions (Anderson and Singer, 2008). On the other hand, the implementation of the Multiple-entry Permits travel policy brought further negative impacts on local citizen's daily life; the sharp increase of mainland visitors caused the issue of over-capacity and tremendously changed the landscape of domestic tourism, community and economic activities. The direct disruption of citizen's daily life, inflation of commodity prices and increasing confrontations created a lot of tensions and strains.

Chin's theory of City-State, published in the eventful year of 2011, worked as a prognostic of radical right ideology and political propaganda, providing radical narratives against the mainland Chinese. It helped people to connect socio-economic stresses with regional politics through *pan-politicization* (泛政治化), and became an ideological framework for radical right movements. The confrontation between the locals and mainland visitors became the catalyst of spreading the radical right ideology among the public. The way it influenced stressed crowds represents a link with subsequent political turmoil in Hong Kong, surrounding itself with debates of Hong Kong independence and distrust against the HKSAR government and even the constitutional political system of "One Country, Two Systems". As mentioned by Campelo *et al.* (2018), highly stressed persons would likely choose radicalization as a possible reactive and corrective action when linked with ideology; it thus could explain why radical right activities and groups were able to effectively attract support from a significant group of people and to rise up quickly during that period.

Indeed, socio-economic conditions are highlighted by many researches as a main background contributing to mass radicalization (Campelo *et al.*, 2018). As argued by Agnew (2010), a person or a group

of people suffering from high magnitude of stress and grievance have a higher chance to alleviate subjective and objective strains by adopting and engaging in deviant activities and rebellion against conformity. In that case, the tale of rising radical right-wing rebellion movements in Hong Kong was in line with GST, hence could be deemed as amongst the social phenomena reflecting the consequence of high level of societal stress and grievances.

My research had also shown a slightly different story about the early development of contemporary right-wing radicalization in Hong Kong. Previous studies suggested that the early footprint of contemporary radical right movements and groups could be traced back to the period of 2009 to 2012, thus they had drawn a direct relationship between the political factors and the rise of radicalization; nevertheless, my article's analysis suggested that the sources of radicalization, which was the effects of high magnitude of collective stress and citizens' feeling of grievances in early stage were not so much relating to political factors but more likely rooted in socio-economic determinants since 2009, an important year marked with the beginning of deterioration of living quality and socio-economic hardship for local people and three years before profound Chinese political influences and the degradation of local government legitimacy.

In addition, historical realities have already proved that socio-economic strains could function like a "greenhouse" of providing a suitable climate for rebellion and the spread of extremism, dragging a nation state and a country into a long-term and destructive socio-political saga. One of the typical examples was the so-called "Years of Lead" (*Anni di piombo*) in Italy, started at the end of the 1960s until the end of the 1980s. During that period, Italian society was suffering from serious issue of economic inequalities and difficulties where underprivileged groups were being alienated and marginalized. Some notable far-left

violent Marxist extreme groups like Worker Force, Red Brigade etc. appeared with a strong political manifesto but emerged at a time while grass-roots workers and university students were highly stressed and angry due to the societal structural inequalities and when the government had failed to address the issues through social and economic reform (Lowry, 2008; Post, 2007; Sundquist, 2010).

6. Limitation and Future Research

This study had limitations. Even though the article's purpose is to revisit the socio-economic causes of right-wing radicalization in Hong Kong during the period of 2008 to 2012, hence is not intended to focus on the political realm, there is no doubt that socio-economic determinants alone – of course – are not sufficient to explain the continued further mass radicalization after 2012. Particularly political agenda became the spotlight of subsequent similar events like the Occupy Central Movement in 2014, a series of the radical right “liberate” protests from 2015 to 2016 and even the recent anti-bill social unrests started in 2019.

Indeed, GST had specifically provided explanatory framework for grievances caused by political factors. Negative political change is one of the crucial elements that could lead to a high magnitude of societal grievances and strains (Agnew, 2010; Campelo *et al.*, 2018). Hence the mutation of highly politicalized and stressed society could favor the development of radicalization. Previous researches (e.g. Kaeding, 2017; Kwong, 2016; Ma, 2015; Veg, 2017) all shared a common explanation that the increasing *ex cathedra* Chinese influences after 2012 had triggered strains within a certain group of local citizens. The highly tensed political atmosphere and confrontations among the pro-establishment, pan-democratic and localist camps became an essential push factor and dynamic of *pan-politicization* in Hong Kong. The

increasing Chinese top-down political influences had brought uncomfortable sentiments and perceptions within the local society, as it had, to certain extent, shaken the local developed social and civic values and norms about the constitutional affairs in relation to the power structure between Hong Kong and the PRC Central Government, the principle of “One Country, Two Systems” and the interpretation of the HKSAR Basic Law. It might indirectly further break down social cohesion by mixing political factors with socio-economic strains.

In addition, socio-economic stress is a complicated realm that covers a wide variety of topics. The article had only concentrated on the situation and effects at the institutional level, including, e.g., job employment security and quality, the quality of living standard, population structure, wealth distribution, socio-cultural conflicts, which only accounted for a small part of the whole picture. For example, a recent study of GST and extremism conducted by Nivette, Eisner and Ribeaud (2017) found out that factors like moral and legal neutralization and personal coping skills and abilities could amplify the impacts of collective strains on violent extremist attitudes when testing the correlation between influence of strains and violent extremism. It means that study of radicalization and extremism could also include the perspective of domestic societal moral and legal culture and even the role and function of local education system in a border sense. Furthermore, recent radicalization researches have started moving beyond the scope of institutional-level perspective, in order to explore the causes from a down-to-top and ground-rooted level. For illustration, the human security approach pays attention to non-traditional security threats which are respectively economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community and political, and how these security threats have created feeling of grievances and strains to push and to pull a person into the trail of radicalization that is echoing with strain-based radicalization

studies (e.g., Botha, 2016; Callaway and Harrelson-Stephens, 2006; Tadjbakhsh, 2005; Titko and Kurtynets, 2019). I thus strongly suggest that it is necessary to develop a human-centric analytic approach to study radicalization in future for the sake of effectively reviewing the full picture of radical right development in Hong Kong.

All in all, this article makes a critical step to provide direction and consolidation for future analysis relating to the actual root causes of right-wing radicalization and social unrest in Hong Kong. Criminological strain theory *prima facie* is applicable to study the social problem of right-wing radicalization. More importantly, it also suggests that collective strains and grievances might have noteworthy influences on local people, creating a perfect climate for rebellion and resulting in their adopting the path of radicalization and support for extremism. Despite the fact that political aspect is beyond the objective and scope of this research, this article shall be able to be the groundwork and framework to explore questions about what, why and how political grievances and strains could lead to mass radicalization. In other words, it shall be a useful theoretical and analytical tool to help researchers to conduct studies relating to the connection between social unrests and politics, and more importantly to provide a clearer direction for policymakers to formulate public policies that focus on addressing strain issues facing local citizens.

Note

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