

## **“The Revolution of Our Times”: Reasons for the Hong Kong Protests of 2019**

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### **Abstract**

The protests breaking out in Hong Kong in 2019 were on an unprecedented scale – even for such a protest-full region; as was the activity engaged in by the police in response. And, while a direct reason for these to ensue was supplied by the HKSAR authorities’ adoption of a regulation providing for Hong Kong inhabitants’ extraditions to Mainland China, the contextual causes can be seen to go far wider, linking up with fears over a deterioration in the “one country, two systems” principle. Here, on the basis of desk research, and by reference to theories from the field of contentious politics and collective action participation, this article presents a model developed to account for the dynamic behind Hong Kong’s 2019 protests. However, specific though its considerations may seem, they may also prove interesting in the very broad context of other anti-government protests taking place in the same year – in Asia, Europe, Latin America and the Arab World. The model referred to takes account of demand and supply of protests (i.e. the role of dissatisfaction with the Hong Kong Region’s “Mainlandization” and its socio-economic and political situation, the development of a

localism, and the organisational structure of Opposition circles vis-à-vis the HKSAR).

**Keywords:** *Hong Kong, protests, Mainlandization, localism, contentious politics, collective action*

## **1. Introduction**

The year 2019 will be entered in the chronicles of Hong Kong's most recent history as a time of much-deepened social and political splits. This reflects its engendering of intensive, mass-scale protest actions that (even by the standards of this protest-full region) could indeed be regarded as on a hitherto-unprecedented scale. Equally without compare was the action the police took in seeking to disperse protesters.

First, peaceful demonstrations took place in March 2019, in response to presaging of the adoption by the government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) of regulations that would make it possible to extradite Hong Kong inhabitants to the People's Republic of China (PRC)<sup>1</sup>. The fears of Hongkongers were then raised by the real possibility that people residing on the territory of Hong Kong might be handed over to the PRC authorities, including also in cases of a political nature. Nonetheless, the contextual causes of the eruption of protest in 2019 are actually more complex than that, linking up with growing fears among the people of Hong Kong that the "one country, two systems" principle was being chipped away at, while socio-economic prospects were deteriorating.

It is the complexity of the protest contesting the decisions of the Hong Kong authorities – and the scale it assumed – that make this an interesting topic for research. What is more, the events occurring in Hong Kong in 2019 have not yet received comprehensive analysis<sup>2</sup>,

while their presentation against the wider context of that same year’s many other anti-government protests involving young people (in Europe, Latin America and the Arab World) also seemed likely to bear fruit in new theoretical conclusions.

This article therefore seeks to propose – via researchers’ theoretical determinations regarding contentious politics and collective forms of social dissatisfaction – a preliminary model to account for the scale of the 2019 Hong Kong protests. That model was in fact derived through desk research, relating *inter alia* to the work of the Public Opinion Research Institute, the team of Francis L.F. Lee, Samson Yuen, Gary Tang, and Edmund W. Cheng, the reports of international NGO’s, the HKSAR government reports and relevant subject literature.

In heading towards this more specific and developed goal, the article first presents the direct causes seen as underpinning the eruption of public dissatisfaction in 2019, as well as its escalation. A further part then addresses the situation *vis-à-vis* changes in Hong Kong’s political and social situation post-1997. The main subject of the text is then the presentation of the aforesaid (preliminary) model capable of accounting for the protests, while a further part uses the model arrived at in analysing demand and supply reasons for the protest, not least the role of dissatisfaction with the region’s “Mainlandization”, as well as its socio-economic and political situation, and the development of the doctrine of localism and of organisational structures present in circles seeking to oppose the HKSAR Government.

## **2. The 2019 Protests**

At first, the Extradition Bill brought forward in February 2019 and given its official presentation by the HKSAR Government on March 29th only provoked the odd, peaceful protest in Hong Kong. However, by June,

the public gatherings convened were beginning to attract ever-larger groups of participants. Thus, the march of opponents of the Bill called for June 9th saw more than a million (of Hong Kong's total of 7 million) inhabitants turn out. The corresponding event on June 16th came close to drawing 2 million (*Hong Kong Free Press*, 17th June 2019).

It was between these two dates – on June 12th – that events took a turn in a different direction, with the watershed moment being the resort to brutal methods of crowd-dispersal on the part of the police. Amnesty International reacted with a report that termed measures the police applied on June 12th “unnecessary and excessive force”, given the use of violence and pepper spray against peaceful protesters and even journalists and paramedics – which the report saw as having “violated international human rights law and standards” (Amnesty International, 2019).

From that time forward, the postulate among the protesters that there be “complete withdrawal of the Extradition Bill from the legislative process” was expanded by four further ones, with the so-called “Five Demands” put in place in this way. The four remaining tenets were: “retraction of the “riot” characterisation” (which the authorities had applied to the events of June 12th); “release and exoneration of arrested protesters”; “the establishment of an Independent Commission of Inquiry into police conduct and use of force during the protests”; and “the resignation of Carrie Lam and implementation of universal suffrage for the Legislative Council election and for the election of the Chief Executive”. Simultaneously, protests became more and more frequent, with 16 of them (each of over 1,000 participants) taking place in July, 34 in August, and 108 in September.

**Figure 1** Hong Kong Pro-democracy Protests by Month (2019)



Source: Kong (2019).

In the event, police actions towards protesters would assume still-more-brutal forms in the weeks after June 12th. Accusations that the police were violating yet-further standards began to surface, as regards the dangerous use of smooth-bore weapons (also aimed at people’s heads); inappropriate procedures when it came to the use of other kinds of weapons; excessive use of gas (including where no threat was posed to personnel, and in enclosed spaces); and unjustified resort to physical violence (Hong Kong Democratic Movement, 2019)<sup>3</sup>. Cases came to light of lethal weapons being deployed, and of the work of paramedics being at least “inconvenienced”. Forty-six out of 221 polled by the Association Concerning Sexual Violence Against Women (and arrested in the course of the escalating protests) were ready to report incidents of sexual violence (*South China Morning Post*, 28th August 2019)<sup>4</sup>. Other detainees likewise alleged that violence had been used against them

while they were being held, along with dehumanising treatment and an obstructed right of access to a lawyer. Police officers were also accused of non-compliance with the legal requirement to have identifying badges, of obstructing the work of journalists, and of dressing up as protesters. Suspicions even emerged regarding transfers of detainees to Mainland China (*Taiwan News*, 18th November 2019), along with rumors about strange cases of youth suicide (Bloomberg, 11th November 2019).

As the means of dispersing protesters grew in severity, so the radicalism inherent in the latter's activity was stepped up. Research shows that non-normative forms of protest tend to arise when angry people develop a sense of disdain for the object of protest, and begin to experience a tangible lack of effectiveness (i.e. an impression that no change in the situation is possible) (Wright, Taylor and Moghaddam, 1990). Young Hongkongers first developed an awareness that mild forms of protest have no effect in the days of the "Umbrella Revolution" of 2014. In turn, research by 4 academic employees of institutions of higher education in Hong Kong, done during the 2019 protests, revealed that more than half of all protesters were ready to accept more brutal forms of manifesting demands (Lee, Tang, Yuen and Cheng, 2019). This may also be linked with police actions, with 2019 also bringing a dramatic fall in public support for the police (while dissatisfaction was still only voiced by 28 per cent in early June, by the end of the year that figure had gone beyond 65 per cent (PORI, 2019b)).

The 2019 protests can also be seen as atypical for other reasons. Unlike with the Umbrella Revolution, protesters did not (seek to) occupy a single place – in a way that would play into the hands of those acting to disperse gathered crowds. The motto taken up by the protesters came to be "Be Water" – recognised as a quote from late actor Bruce Lee. Protesters interpret this as a tactic whereby actions taken by law

enforcers are adapted to rapidly, on the basis of mobility and the avoidance of any more-protracted actions. Experiences with earlier protests (and the ease with which they might be broken up) thus led to a situation this time round in which even pointing to the organisers of the action is precluded. The decision-making process is decentralised, and no single organisation in society promotes further radicalisation of demonstrations. Nor did the 2019 protests even forge new Opposition leaders, as it indeed remains difficult to say who is initiating the efforts, or what organisational network is in place. Communications take place in encoded form (e.g. via Telegram), as well as via Internet fora like *LIHKG* (Purbrick, 2019).

A matter of major importance is the way the 2019 protests facilitated development in the area of symbolism – among localists and nativists – with the effect being to enhance generational identity. Visual symbols of the struggle were also created (*i.a.* a colour-changed Hong Kong flag on which black is treated as the colour of protest), as were numerous songs serving as Hong Kong’s new anthem.

The 2019 protests also had a historic dimension conferred on them by the scale of the police reaction – through half a year of protests, police personnel released no fewer than 10,000 canisters of tear gas (*South China Morning Post*, 1st December 2019). And in the period June 9th to December 3rd alone, some 5948 people in Hong Kong were arrested (among them a great many juveniles)<sup>5</sup>.

### **3. The Context of the Protests**

The proposal that the causes of the 2019 outbreak of protests be accounted for, along with the dynamics surrounding them, first required a brief presentation of the wider context of social and political change in the region. For, if many of the processes are to be accounted for, it is

necessary to understand the changes taking place in Hong Kong from the time it ceased to be British.

With the approaching end of the 99-year lease on the New Territories<sup>6</sup> (accounting for as much as 92 per cent of the UK's Hong Kong), a period of negotiations began – initially informally (with the visit of Governor Murray MacLehose to Beijing in 1979), and later officially, via Sino-British talks on the future of Hong Kong held in 1982-1984 (Loh, 2010). While the British considered further rule over Hong Kong proper (as the island of that name and part of the Kowloon Peninsula were in fact seen as British in perpetuity), the facts that the New Territories were such a large part of the overall administered area, and that Beijing was proving implacable, led to the realisation that a negotiated form of handover to the PRC would have to be arrived at.

However, after over 100 years under British administration, Hong Kong was a region different from other parts of China. It had developed greatly not only in economic terms (at the time of handover to the PRC, Hong Kong was the 11th-richest territory in the world in terms of GDP per capita) but also politically – with the level of freedom enjoyed by citizens being the second-highest result to be observed anywhere in Asia (Sing, 2009). Hong Kong had developed a civil society and a specific identity, with a party system also beginning to take shape by the 1990s. At the same time, several decades on from the proclamation of the People's Republic, many immigrants had come into Hong Kong seeking a better life under the British administration, and an escape from the totalitarianism of China (Tsang, 2004). This left it a matter of considerable importance to Hong Kong residents in just which way the region's transition under Chinese rule would take place. In the meantime, the 1980s and 1990s brought modernisation processes that continue to hinder integration with the PRC through to the present day.



The Sino-British negotiations (at which the inhabitants of Hong Kong enjoyed no direct representation) ultimately established that Hong Kong’s transfer to the People’s Republic would see it take the form of Special Administrative Region in which the freedoms, politics and laws in place would be retained for a further period of 50 years. This was the essence of the solution that came to be termed “one country, two systems”. Hong Kong would retain its capitalist system, and exchangeable currency, and authorities elected by Hongkongers themselves. Furthermore, it would continue to have a presence in international organisations, and would go on issuing its own travel documents. The only entitlements vis-à-vis Hong Kong to be gained by the central authorities of China – from the outset – were those relating to defence and foreign affairs (Joint Declaration, 1984). This looked like the only conceivable compromise acceptable to the two sides in the negotiations, and accepted it ultimately was.

Hong Kong’s transfer under PRC authority was preceded by a so-called transition period (lasting from the end of the negotiations and signing of the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration through to the handover of territory on July 1st 1997); and this was marked by debate over the region’s democratisation, as well as the development of the first political parties. Broader democratic movements came into being, the process also being boosted by growing fears, mainly – though not solely – aroused by the massacre perpetrated around Beijing’s Tiananmen Square in June 1989 (Ma, 2012: 160).

Following Hong Kong’s transfer under Chinese control on July 1st 1997, the first more serious crisis situation (and visible manifestation of disparate visions as to the region’s future) arose in the context of mass protests on July 1st 2003. The 6th anniversary of the Hong Kong handover thus featured a numerically spectacular anti-government march in which perhaps half a million out a total of 7 million inhabitants may

have taken part. Citizens were making clear their dissatisfaction with the administration of first HKSAR Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa, reflecting his failure to fully cope with such situations as the SARS epidemic, as well as first stories about the introduction of an anti-secession law by virtue of Article 23 of the Basic Law of the Hong Kong SAR. The scale of these protests in fact came as a surprise to the Hong Kong authorities and Chinese decision-makers alike, and resulted in a change of Beijing's policy towards the region (Cheung, 2012).

Subsequent years brought ever-greater friction between the HKSAR's citizens and its leaders, as well as tensions between inhabitants of Hong Kong and Mainland China. Among other things, key tensions post-2003 were reflected in protests:

- against the demolition of the historic buildings on the Star Ferry and Queen's Ferry quays (2006/2007);
- against the Express Rail Link (in 2009-10);
- against the 2012 introduction into schools of "Moral and National" teaching;
- against parallel trading (in 2012 and 2015);
- known as the Umbrella Revolution (in 2014);
- in Mong Kok district (in February 2016) – which grew into scuffles following the removal by HKSAR authorities of the street traders offering their food products to passers-by in line with the traditions of the Chinese New Year;
- connected with interference by the authorities of the Chinese University of Hong Kong in the student "Democracy Wall" of 2017.

Also needing to be added to all of that are the large-scale organised demonstrations each year on June 4th (to mark the anniversary of the Tiananmen massacre), July 1st (the day of the Hong Kong handover)

and January 1st (in commemoration of the demand that elections with universal suffrage be established in Hong Kong, and simultaneous opposition to China’s influence in the region).

Likewise, the fears Hongkongers have been expressing by way of protest can *inter alia* be considered linked with:

- steadily-developing curbs on Opposition activity (examples given include denial of certain Opposition candidates’ rights to stand for election; the removal from LegCo of politicians perceived to have sworn their oaths in an improper way; and the delegalisation of the Hong Kong National Party),
- influxes of Mainland Chinese (both within the One Way Permit framework and as tourists and purchasers of goods – the feelings expressed were that these people were not able to behave properly in public places, purchased goods in Hong Kong (and were hence responsible for price rises), and were taking places in hospitals and schools that would otherwise go to Hong Kong inhabitants),
- the limits being set on academic freedoms and freedom of speech (examples would involve harassment of academic personnel engaged in pro-democracy activity, as well as progressing self-censorship in the media),
- the involvement of the Hong Kong authorities in unjustified new infrastructural developments clearly initiated by the PRC authorities and serving the further economic integration of Hong Kong with the Chinese Mainland,
- the “Mandarinisation” of both the culture and language of Hong Kong.

Thus, after 1997, protests became some kind of “new normal” for Hong Kong, to the extent that the city even started to go by the name of “city of protest”<sup>7</sup>. Considering public processions alone, the last decade

brought 3 a day on average (Hong Kong Police Force, 2019). As Francis L.F. Lee, Samson Yuen, Gary Tang and Edmund W. Cheng indicate, following the handover “a combination of repeated government blunders and severe economic recession led to the rise of public grievances and protests” (Lee, Yuen, Tang and Cheng, 2019). These processes served to increase disparities between Hong Kong and China, not least as they helped shape a Hong Kong identity.

#### **4. Proposal of a Model of HK Protests**

Questions posed often in the social sciences concern the ways in which protests are initiated, the nature of the factors mobilising people into participation, the reasons for some to join protests while others not to, and the reasons for some to devote more time and effort than others, even if levels of frustration may be at the same or a similar level throughout a society. Yet further questions concern prolonged (or short-lived) participation in a protest, as well as the motivations to engage in one form of protest or another (including more radical options).

One of the first thrusts to social sciences’ research into protests, not deriving from philosophical considerations, emphasised the importance of relative deprivation. Authors involved here included James C. Davies, Walter Runciman and Ted Gurr. Empirical study confirmed the relatively great explanatory power of fraternalistic relative deprivation (the perceived discrepancy between the position that a person’s in-group actually has, and the position the given person thinks that group should have). However, still-stronger explanations can be obtained where fraternalistic deprivation meets with egoistic relative deprivation (the perceived discrepancy between an individual’s own current position and the one the person thinks they should have). A further significant theory emerged as the “frustration-aggression” theory, which underlines that,

when certain goals are blocked by external agency, the reaction can take the form of acts aiming to lift the blockade (Klandermans and van Stekelenburg, 2017).

Both of these theories were seen as forming part of the broader category of “grievance theories”. When the resource mobilisation theory, emphasising the role of resources (like time, money and skills) and the ability to use them, became popular, grievance theories lost the attention of many academics (*ibid.*).

Also exerting an influence was social identity theory, which underlines the way in which people participate in collective action to raise group status if they are not able to leave a group, or when they believe that the position of the group as regards status is variable, or when the low status of a group is perceived as illegitimate.

Recent studies by social psychologists like Bert Klandermans and Jacquelin van Stekelenburg emphasise how social identity (awareness of membership in a group, attached to emotional significance and a positive evaluation of that membership), cognition (processes whereby information is interpreted, analysed, stored and used), emotion (a feeling of frustration as an accelerator) and motivation (a desire to achieve a goal) all mediate between collective identity and collective action.

Collective identity influences collective action, but is also influenced by it. The role of the collective identity in protests is also underlined in movements theories set up on the meso-level of analysis (i.e. the level of groups, parties and movements). Identification with the group is a strong predictor of attendance at protests<sup>8</sup>. The stronger the collective identity, the greater the chances of protests taking place.

Collective identity should not be confused with social identity, even as the two are linked closely. According to Tajfel, social identity represents an individual’s cognition of his or her membership in one or more groups (Tajfel, 1978: 63). The role of other group members is then

that of providing for the sharing of ideas, feelings and interests, in a process that leads to awareness as regards similarity and shared grievances.

According to social identity theory, protests arise where the status of a group is not perceived as legitimised, but where its position is felt to be capable of being changed. Group identity has to be politicised for protests to actually take place. The more people feel their links with a protesting group, the greater are the chances that sympathy will turn into actual involvement on the ground.

Social psychologists have also emphasised the soundness of a distinction being drawn between two pathways leading to participation in collective action (i.e. the instrumental involving perceived costs and benefits of participation, access to resources and an assessment of chances of success; as well as the identity-related, whereby there is identification with people involved). There might even be a third such pathway (entailing emotions – group-based anger, and an awareness of the unfairness of the decision-making processes) (Klandermans and van Stekelenburg, 2017).

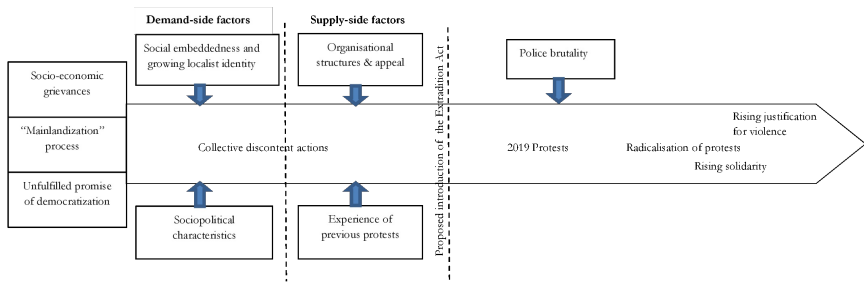
Involvement in protests is also very much predicated on involvement with organisations active in society. This is *inter alia* associated with the greater chances of a person in the latter category being inclined to mobilise; as well as the way in which organisations convey the importance of the situation in society.

Equally, individuals' commitment to a protest does not arise in isolation, so it is crucial that the premises underpinning the emergence of a protest movement are elucidated and indicated. These will be factors operating at the meso-level, rather than the micro. Those studying the politics of contention (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly, 2001) stress the importance of:

- networks and mobilising structures/social embeddedness (social networks and movement organisations);
- ideology/cognitive frameworks/collective identity/emotions (*i.a.* collective processes of interpretation);
- political opportunities and threats (a changing political/economic/social environment, socio-political cleavages).

In line with these cases of what has been established theoretically, we have found ourselves in a position to propose a model that can account for the outbreak of protests in Hong Kong in 2019. On the so-called “demand side”, it is possible to point to socio-economic and political grievances, as well as a growing localist identity. On the “supply side”, the growth of organisational networks among local circles combined with experience relating to earlier protests (in the context of a learning organisation). A further key factor underpinning the radicalisation of protests entailed the growing brutality of action on the part of the police.

**Figure 2** The Outbreak of the 2019 Hong Kong Protests



Source: Author’s own elaboration.

## **5. The Demand Side**

### ***5.1. Socio-economic Grievances***

For many, Hong Kong would seem to symbolise great economic achievements, given annual average GDP growth of 3.0 per cent (2018); an unemployment rate of about 3.2 per cent (2019), an inflation rate around 3.0 per cent (2019), GDP per capita at one of the world's highest levels, a budget of the region that is in surplus and, one of the largest monetary reserves anywhere in the world, despite the fact of this being a polity of just 7.5 million inhabitants. Beyond that, the HKSAR was the world's number-eight exporter of goods as of 2018, as well as its fifth-placed region where net inflows of FDI are concerned. According to the Heritage Foundation, Hong Kong has long taken top positions in rankings of ease of doing business and economic freedoms, while taxes are among the world's lowest (Heritage Foundation, 2019).

It is as more person-focused indicators are turned to that Hong Kong starts to look much less favourable, in relation to the level of human security. For a start, as of 2018, more than 20 per cent of the region's inhabitants could be regarded as living below the poverty line – with this characteristic in fact exhibiting an upward trend in recent years (Census and Statistic Department, HKSAR, 2018). Stratification of the society here represents one of the world's worst such cases, with figures worse than in any other highly developed parts of the world (Government of the HKSAR, 2018); and the trend for this is once again upward. It is typical for the alarm to be sounded where disparities go above 0.4, yet the 2006 figure for Hong Kong stood at 0.533, and had reached 0.539 by 2016, according to Hong Kong Census Reports. Alternative research from Oxfam reveals a Gini coefficient value of 0.473 (Oxfam, 2018). The median monthly household income of the top 10 per cent is thus 44 times as great as that among the lowest 10 per cent in society (while in



2006 it had “only” been 34 times greater, according to Oxfam). It is worth adding that, as of 2018, 21 Hong Kong business tycoons had a total net worth equal to the HKSAR’s entire fiscal reserves.

Meanwhile, in the period 2003–2008, as many as 62.9 per cent of those in employment in Hong Kong experienced no advancement in levels of earnings, while the figures for the whole decade of 1998–2008 revealed 47.2 per cent of employed people failing to increase their earnings. In turn, in the same period, only 45.9 per cent of the lowest earners saw their remuneration increase at all (Legislative Council Secretariat, Hong Kong, 2015).

Thus, while the whole 1997–2013 period brought GDP growth in Hong Kong averaging out at 3.5 per cent a year, what people earned only increased by 14 per cent overall<sup>9</sup>. The Oxfam team offered the following summary of the situation in Hong Kong – “the rich have gotten richer, while the poor – despite their hard work – have not been able to share the fruits of economic growth” (Oxfam, 2018).

These economic indicators can readily be supplemented by data on Hongkongers’ actual feelings of deprivation. According to work by the HK-based Civic Exchange think-tank, as many as 68 per cent of inhabitants felt disquiet about the threat of poverty (compared with just 28 per cent of the people of Shanghai, and 47 per cent of Singaporeans (Lai and DeGolyer, 2016: 10-12)). Hong Kong sociologist Alvin Y. So summed up the post-1997 changes as the collapse of the Hong Kong Dream: “Hong-Kongers began to doubt the belief that Hong Kong was full of opportunity, because no matter how hard they worked they still could not avoid experiencing downward mobility” (So, 2011).

In turn, according to the *World Happiness Report 2019*, Hong Kong society took just 76th place among 156 states for which data were presented (Helliwell, Layard and Sachs, 2019). The region’s rating in

terms of the *Happy Planet Index* in turn leaves it ranked 123rd out of 140<sup>10</sup> (*Happy Planet Index*, 2016).

At a level more specific to our considerations, surveys actually conducted among protesters in July 2019 had 92 per cent of respondents agreeing or even agreeing strongly that “the wealth gap in Hong Kong is at an unreasonable level”. Eighty-four per cent were likewise prepared to support the statement that “I am angry about the class inequality that exists in Hong Kong” (Fung and Lee, 2019).

A 2019 research in turn shows that 61 per cent of Hongkongers are considered to have “poor mental well-being and unsatisfactory mental health”, with this representing a significant drop from previous studies undertaken in the region (Mind Hong Kong, 2019).

Through to 1997, the net value for people’s satisfaction with their condition as regards livelihood at the given time remained above 0. In contrast, since that time, it was only in the years 2005-2009 that satisfaction exceeded 0 (PORI, 2020d). Levels of satisfaction with the “present political situation” have in turn manifested a downward trend since 2007 (PORI, 2020e), while the last 10 years have seen Hongkongers regarding “livelihood problems” as their matters of greatest concern (PORI, 2020c).

Polls also show that Hongkongers have lost confidence in their region’s future (with a downward trend noted for this issue through the period since 2007 (PORI, 2020a)).

Polls show how housing has been one of the key problems in Hong Kong. According to *The Demographia International Housing Affordability Survey 2019*, property here is among the world’s most expensive (Demographia, 2019). In the case of Hong Kong, the index generated by dividing median house prices by median household income yields a ratio of 20.9:1 (cf. 3.5:1 in the USA).

In line with that kind of trend, the mean price of a small flat increased 273.9 per cent in the years 2007–2017; while median household income rose by just 54.8 per cent (Census and Statistics Department, HKSAR, 2019). Thus, instead of the prospect of a person having their own flat becoming a more realistic one over time, it is actually becoming a more distant one. Indeed, while flat ownership in the 1981–1996 period rose from 40.6 to 67.1 per cent, the change for the years 2006–2013 was a decline from 70.5 to 66.7 per cent (Legislative Council Secretariat, Hong Kong, 2015).

Thus, in research by academics at the City University of Hong Kong over 75 per cent of people in the 18–35 year group were found to be living with their parents (Yip and Forrest, 2014). The average cost of hiring 1m<sup>2</sup> of flat on the Hong Kong market as of 2017 was 408 HKD, while the purchase of such an area was close to 140,000 HKD.

Over 209,000 Hongkongers live in the legendary “caged homes”, i.e. cages of floor area even as limited as 1.9 m<sup>2</sup>, located within shared flats; while a still-greater number reside in very poor conditions (Census and Statistics Department, HKSAR, 2016). The median size of “dwelling boxes” is 4.5 m<sup>2</sup> per person. Furthermore, the mean area of new property in Hong Kong represents one of the lowest values anywhere in the world at 45 m<sup>2</sup>, as compared with 76 m<sup>2</sup> in the UK, 95 m<sup>2</sup> in Japan, 109 m<sup>2</sup> in Germany, and 201 m<sup>2</sup> in the USA (Wilson, 2014).

Rental costs of “caged homes” take up 41 per cent of occupants’ income (*South China Morning Post*, 23rd June 2019) and are still rising, while social housing will not resolve this problem. Recently, the average waiting time for general applicants seeking this kind of accommodation has been 5.4 years (Hong Kong Housing Authority, 2020).

Alongside residential issues, the economic situation also makes it harder for the people of Hong Kong to access medical services. It is not

just total public spending on social welfare as a percentage of total public expenditure that is low, as expenditure on healthcare is also among the lowest levels to be found among OECD countries. Wong Hung's research shows that 34 per cent of those surveyed cannot afford regular dental care, while 13 per cent are not in a position to pay for healthcare, should they become ill (*South China Morning Post*, 24th June 2016).

Young people in Hong Kong face major problems. Unemployment among people of this age is at twice the average level. Promotion among 15-24-year-olds mainly took place in the less well-paid service professions and groups of salespeople (from 21 per cent in 1991 to 34 per cent in 2011). Mean monthly earnings in this group are at the 9880 HKD level, while middle-level employees earn 18,250 HKD, managers 35,000, and specialists 35,900 (Legislative Council Secretariat, Hong Kong, 2015). It is thus typical for young people to be working in considerably less well-paid positions – a circumstance that does not reflect their still-developing professional experience, as much as the fact that promotion within the professional structure is difficult to achieve. More than half of all those in the 20-34-year age group have less than the median remuneration for Hong Kong. And, while 18-22-year-olds were earning as much as 80 per cent of median remuneration back in 1981, by 1996 that figure was at 60 per cent, and by 2006 – 56 per cent (Wu, 2010: 16). If these data are not alarming in and of themselves, we might add to them the fact that just small group of people in this age group declare themselves satisfied with the region's economic situation.

At the same time, levels of youth frustration may be higher than they otherwise would be given rising ambition, while the years 1991–2016 brought almost a three-fold increase in numbers taking their education beyond the secondary level – from a figure of 11.3 per cent in 1991 to 32.7 per cent in 2016.

## **5.2. Political Grievances**

One of Hongkongers’ leading concerns surrounds the influence Mainland China is able to exert on the internal politics and *realia* characterising Hong Kong. Hongkongers are striving to achieve universal suffrage for the region, and to resist its “Mainlandization”.

Surveys on more than 1,000 of the 2019 protesters show that 93 per cent of respondents either agree strongly or at least agree with the statement “I am angry due to the absence of universal suffrage in Hong Kong”, while 88 per cent concur that: “I am angry due to Beijing’s intervention in Hong Kong affairs” (Fung and Lee, 2019).

According to the EIU *Democracy Index*, 2020 saw Hong Kong down again to 75th position among 167 polities monitored. Freedom House conferred a 59-point assessment on Hong Kong in 2019, compared with 68 points in 2009 (where 100 points is best and 0 worst). Freedom of the press is also on a downward trend, according to Reporters Without Borders. Hong Kong’s 18th placing in 2002 compares with 73rd (out of 180) in 2019.

For Hongkongers, the most striking signs of “Mainlandization” relate to:

- a lack of progress with the region’s promised democratisation;
- attempts to introduce Art. 23 legislation in Hong Kong, as well as “Moral and National Education”;
- curtailment of freedom of speech and academic freedoms;
- the promotion of Mandarin in place of Cantonese;
- backing for controversial infrastructure projects that integrate Hong Kong with Mainland China;
- interference in the process by which candidates for the legislature are nominated, with certain legislators even expelled from LegCo (as with the 2016 oath-taking crisis).

The main, immutable, aim of the whole movement of the Opposition to the HKSAR Government entails the democratisation of elections of the Chief Executive and the Hong Kong legislature. In this regard, the wording of Articles 45 and 68 of the Basic Law are invoked, with this being as follows.

Art. 45:

“The Chief Executive of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region shall be selected by election or through consultations held locally and be appointed by the Central People's Government.

The method for selecting the Chief Executive shall be specified in the light of the actual situation in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region and in accordance with the principle of gradual and orderly progress. The ultimate aim is the selection of the Chief Executive by universal suffrage upon nomination by a broadly representative nominating committee in accordance with democratic procedures. (...)”

Art. 68:

“The Legislative Council of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region shall be constituted by election.

The method for forming the Legislative Council shall be specified in the light of the actual situation in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region and in accordance with the principle of gradual and orderly progress. The ultimate aim is the election of all the members of the Legislative Council by universal suffrage. (...)”

The fact that opportunities for universal-suffrage elections to be run seem to be fading away is what pro-democrats see as Mainland China's coercion against Hong Kong. Such an interpretation is for example

applied to a measure in paper providing for the democratisation of Hong Kong elections, but in fact framing them very markedly is the “Decision of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress on Issues Relating to the Selection of the Chief Executive of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region by Universal Suffrage and on the Method for Forming the Legislative Council of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region in the Year 2016”.

A very important matter – and seen as a further effort to subordinate the region to the mainland – is the implementation of Art. 23 of Hong Kong's Basic Law, which provides as follows: “The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region shall enact laws on its own to prohibit any act of treason, secession, sedition, subversion against the Central People's Government, or theft of state secrets, to prohibit foreign political organizations or bodies from conducting political activities in the Region, and to prohibit political organizations or bodies of the Region from establishing ties with foreign political organizations or bodies”. The fear of Hongkongers was that a provision of this kind might offer a pretext for jailing the regime's political opponents. They therefore came out in protest against attempts to introduce legislation implementing Article 23. The most spectacular manifestation of that was a massive demonstration held on 1st July 2003, when 500,000 people marched against the introduction of a National Security Bill. Specific fears relating to this legislation were that it might further erode freedom of speech in the region, and provide for the prosecution of political opponents of the PRC.

Yet further public discontent was aroused by the spectre of “Moral and National Education” being introduced in the HKSAR. It was Chief Executive Donald Tsang who heralded this measure in October 2010, suggesting that the new lessons in question would come in with the 2012/2013 school year. However, this idea provoked opposition among

pupils, teacher and parents alike, the fear obviously being of an injection into Hong Kong schooling of the kind of ideology put across in classrooms elsewhere in the PRC. Indeed, the fact that these fears were by no means groundless was made clear when material being prepared for teachers was revealed to present the Chinese Communist Party in glowingly uncritical terms, even as the two-party system in the USA was criticised for the way it simply inflicts a kind of suffering and exhaustion upon the American people (Kan, 2012).

Hong Kong's striking decline in terms of its ranking in the *Press Freedom Index* reflects an increasing number of assaults on journalists, as well as progressing self-censorship at the level of both media and individual journalists. The considered view of the Hong Kong Journalists Association (HKJA) was that, while Beijing had once been a back-seat driver vis-à-vis the Hong Kong media, the protests had propelled it forward into the front seat (Hong Kong Journalists Association, 2017). Undisputable fact is the way in which more media are now under the direct control of Mainland-Chinese capital; while there are also suggestions regarding arbitrary activity on the part of the Communication Authority (as Hong Kong's media market regulator). However, what are obviously the most serious reservations concern cases in which journalists apparently now fear for their health or lives. This *inter alia* reflects: (1) notorious abductions of employees at a publishing house willing to entertain unfavourable views of the authorities in Beijing, (2) the shocking physical assaults on journalists alluded to above, and (3) threats directed at journalists (Reporters Without Borders, 2017).

Naturally, Hongkongers are sensitive to any activity or event that might signal some attempt to curtail the region's autonomy (Yuen and Chung, 2018). The list therefore extends all the way from large new infrastructural developments serving to further integrate the region with



“the motherland” through to limitations on the teaching of Cantonese in schools and the displacement of the language in the public sphere.

Likewise capable of raising the temperature at any moment are situations perceived as influencing Hong Kong’s internal political processes, as for example when 6 localist candidates were refused permission to register for the 2016 elections to LegCo.

### **5.3. Localism**

As we have seen, the emergence of a collective identity and a social identity in Hong Kong has been a key underlying aspect where the protests are concerned. Increased generational and local identity in Hong Kong has been tangible since around 2008<sup>11</sup>, and the circumstance in which an identity is seen to be developing is provided by the doctrine of localism.

Perhaps paradoxically, the development of local identity in the region has been noticeable even as a steady stream of settlers have come into Hong Kong from Mainland China (*i.a.* thanks to a possibility present since 1997 for 150 Chinese people a day to settle in the region, ostensibly as part of an effort to reunite families). Yet, when the results of Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute polling carried out between 4th and 10th December 2019 came in, they revealed a record 55 per cent of respondents declaring themselves to be Hongkongers. Even more than that, the figure was of almost 82 per cent where the group of 18-29-year-olds was concerned. Where a somewhat broader definition is used (to include Hongkongers alongside Hongkongers in China), the figure rises to almost 78 per cent of respondents (and over 94 per cent of 18-29-year-olds). In general, the younger the age group, the more frequent some kind of settling into a local identity becomes, and the lower the level of trust or confidence in the “one country, two systems” approach, or indeed the authorities of the HKSAR as such (PORI,

2020b). In fact, the now-distinct localism present in Hong Kong seems to have grown in line with Mainland China's interventionism, as well as the degree to which the HKSAR Government is perceived as subservient to the PRC (Wang, 2019).

The developing localist and nativist movements are serving their socialisation functions (Lee, 2020). The first recently present circles of a proto-localist nature were the parties dubbing themselves "radical democrats" (and hence at the same time pointing to excessive moderation on the part of the Democratic Party existing since the early 1990s). The parties in question were the Civic Party and the League of Social Democrats, which both came into being in 2006, with both helping nurture "sharper" forms of political activity connected with the changes in Hong Kong following the 2003 protests. With time, they found themselves propelled into the political mainstream in the role of Opposition, while still ensuring that their circles espoused greater activism than had been the case previously (Kwong, 2016).

The development of localist identity was facilitated by the protests against the proposals of demolition of the old Star Ferry and Queen's Ferry buildings, parallel trading, the Hong Kong Express Rail Link, and the pursuit of the "Moral and National Education" idea; as well as by the "Umbrella Revolution" of 2014. In the aftermath of that event, further organisations came into being, such as Hong Kong Indigenous, Demosistō, the Hong Kong National Party and Youngspiration. These fed on the dissatisfaction rooted in the streets of Hong Kong during the Umbrella Revolution, and their manifestos refer to the slogan of the region's self-determination, or even to the issue that would be a natural extension of that – independence for Hong Kong<sup>12</sup>.

Indeed, slogans relating to independence are an aspect of identity change of a kind that could hardly be noted at all pre-2011. Thus, the development of a broader self-determination doctrine can be linked,

*inter alia*, with the publication of the 2011 work by Horace Chin Wan-kan entitled *On the Hong Kong City-State*. Chin Wan-kan slogans and postulates found their resonance among younger inhabitants of Hong Kong, leading certain activists to go a step further and begin slipping independence-type ideas into the political debate. And when (in 2016) the Chinese University in Hong Kong engaged in polling, that produced a result astounding for many – that around 40 per cent of young Hongkongers (aged 15-24) were ready to swing behind the idea of their region’s independence (*Hong Kong Free Press*, 8th June 2017).

In turn, in October 2019, as the protests against the Extradition Act were in full swing, the Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute carried out telephone research on a group of 1,000 inhabitants of Hong Kong, from which it emerged that 11 per cent (and 25 per cent of respondents aged 18-25) were backing the idea of the region’s independence (PORI, 2019a).

A localist identity is linked with concern to preserve the city’s autonomy and local culture. The current localism is thus characterised by a major integral component of civic nationalism (Kwan, 2016; Veg, 2017), as well as growing radicalism (Chan, 2016). This is not merely the defence of Hong Kong’s interests, or its identity, but rather an emphasising of civic values, such as the rule of law and civil liberties (Kaeding, 2017).

The tendency for the Hong Kong identity to be brought into sharp relief in recent times needs to be linked to the marked socio-political divide now being delineated, as well as the radicalisation of activity on the part of political opponents (“probably the most powerful factor that brings group membership to mind is conflict or rivalry between groups” (van Stekelenburg, 2013)). The development of local and generational identity is seen to be a key aspect of opposition to the HKSAR authorities.

## **6. The Supply Side**

### ***6.1. Organisational Structures and Appeal***

Participation in protests is very much predicated on social embeddedness, with protest movements not found to arise in circumstances of social isolation. The role of organisations in which citizens are active is very important (Klandermans, Toorn and van Stekelenburg, 2008). A person's being active in given social circles facilitates the interactions needed if protests are to develop. It is in groups that awareness develop, processes of identification gain strength and the sense of grievance grows. Organisations in society also have an information role, as well as a role in socialisation; and they supply the frameworks within which action becomes a real possibility. A presence in given circles at the same time increases the likelihood of a given person being targeted and motivated to participate in protests.

Alongside social networks as defined in the classical way, social media and communication online would seem to be ever-more relevant. This is made very clear by research into contemporary protest, whether this be the "Arab Spring" beginning in 2010, or the protests held around the world in 2019<sup>13</sup>.

Social and political cleavages in Hong Kong led to the development of two distinct blocs, i.e. a pro-democracy one operating in opposition to the government of the HKSAR and Chinese influence in Hong Kong; as well as a pro-establishment one. And what has been noticeable is the spinout in the direction of autonomy – from the aforesaid pro-democracy camp – of a more-radical "localist" pillar.

While the 2019 protests were in progress, participants were most likely to define themselves as "moderate democrats" (37.5 per cent of those surveyed). However, more often than among the population of Hong Kong as a whole, they would instead be inclined to use the

description “localist” (in 31.6 per cent of cases) (Lee, Yuen, Tang and Cheng, 2019). Furthermore, and interestingly, as time passed, and as protests therefore radicalised, the share of protesters regarding themselves as localists increased steadily.

According to Wai-man Lam, in the period 2014-2016 alone, 45 of the organisations appearing in Hong Kong used the term – or could be regarded as – localist (Lam, 2018). However, a further sub-division is seen to be possible<sup>14</sup>, into: community-oriented organisations (some 15 in number, including Fixing Hong Kong, Wan Chai Commons or TaiPosunwalker; and orientated towards the assistance of the elderly and needy, as well as support for the development of local communities, which is to say the first thrust of activity known to have characterised localism); professional organisations (of which there are around 15, including the Progressive Lawyers Group); and political groups (today represented by The Alliance to Resume British Sovereignty over Hong Kong and Independence, Civic Passion, Demosistō, the Hong Kong Autonomy Movement, Hong Kong First, Hong Kong Indigenous, Hong Kong Localism Power, the Hong Kong National Party, the Hong Kong Resurgence Order, the Neo Democrats, and Youngspiration).

Among the latter localist organisations that are political in nature, it is possible to draw a distinction between the more nativist (even chauvinistic) circles focusing in on the struggle for the political and cultural separation of Hong Kong from Mainland China (and thus comprising “Autonomists”), or else the groups that stress the significance of social problems in a region afflicted by economic disparities (i.e. the “Left-Wingers”) (Tse, 2014).

Needless to say, social media and the Internet represent an important means by which these groups promote information exchange, build ties and generate an appeal. According to Francis L.F. Lee and colleagues, more than 76 per cent of polled protest participants had been

obtaining their data from “online media”. When the surveys run during the mass protests were excluded, that share was found to be even greater. Internet fora proved to be a very important information channel (more crucial than traditional media) – being mentioned by 75.9 per cent; as did *Facebook* (85 per cent) and *Telegram* (46.97 per cent) (Lee, Yuen, Tang and Cheng, 2019; Lee, Tang, Yuen and Cheng, 2019).

The appeal posted on social media in 2019 had a clear focus on police brutality. Analysis of groups established by protesters on *Telegram* (the *Anti-Extradition Promo Channel*) shows that, over the 14 days considered (1st to 14th October 2019), 180 of the 771 graphic items posted were aimed at the police (as compared with 129 targeted either at the HKSAR Government itself, or its institutions, or at public entities like MTR (the Mass Transit Railway)). Rather fewer (143) entries sought to motivate people into taking action, reminding people about protests and showing the level of solidarity with them internationally. Yet further items (102 in number) attacked the Chinese Communist Party and PRC central authorities, while there were 6 launching a simultaneous attack against both the latter and the HKSAR Government. Only a surprisingly small number of these visual items (49) were exclusively about the promotion of values, and protest slogans. On the other hand, there were no items attacking Mainland Chinese people directly<sup>15</sup>.

A finding of importance if we are to appreciate the roles of the networks of organisations and appeals came from Lee and colleagues, who noted how more than 84 per cent of participants in protests took part along “with friends, schoolmates, family members or colleagues”. 4.5 per cent turned out alongside other members of an organisation they belonged to, while over 15 per cent regarded themselves as independent participants.

These data attest to the younger part of the region’s population being more influenced by the localist message, and more likely to frame their behaviour in terms of actual participation in protests, and tangible opposition to the HKSAR Government.

## **6.2. Experience of Previous Protests**

People’s involvement in collective action at a given time is very much predicated on their earlier experience with participation in protests. Also important – at the institutional level – is the status of a movement as a “self-learning organisation”. The recent protests in Hong Kong prove to be no exceptions to these rules. The last decade has brought several (or more) important protest actions in which this region’s inhabitants were in a position to acquire experience. Most participants studied by Lee *et.al.* had indeed joined the Umbrella Movement of 2014 (between 44.3 and 76.6 per cent, depending on the 2019 event). They had also honed their protesting skills at annual (4th June or 1st July) marches, as well as in the 2012 anti-national-education movement (Lee, Tang, Yuen and Cheng, 2019). Equally, a notable fact is that 2019 offered the first experience of action within a social movement for a certain percentage of protesters researched. In fact, depending on the demonstration, between 12.7 and 22.5 per cent of those polled declared that they had had no previous relevant experience (Lee, Tang, Yuen and Cheng, 2019).

Participation in earlier protests nevertheless increases the probability of involvement in further ones, as well as raising the level of professionalism associated with collective action; and this is in line with the theory of self-learning of social movements.

## 7. The Dynamic of the 2019 Protests

### 7.1. *New Forms of Protest and Identity Changes*

Even globally, there was an inclination to regard the events unfolding in Hong Kong in 2019 as something exceptional. What is more, certain subsequent protests breaking out in Europe and Latin America have been regarded as inspired (at least in terms of form) by the resistance young Hongkongers have been manifesting. Such conclusions have mainly been reached on the basis of the specific structure protests have assumed, as in part signalled in this article's introduction. Relevant features are taken to be as follows.

- (1) A central(ised) leadership of the movement is seen to be lacking, and the term “leaderless” is applied specifically (Serhan, 2019; Rachman *et al.*, 2019), as no single organisation or group is coordinating the course protests take, or designating objectives, forms or stages of the collective contention being manifested. It is thus symbolic that there are simply no leaders that might be singled out by name. Indeed, even the actual progress with the protests in Hong Kong did not result in the emergence of any new leaders – an unusual circumstance. Participants this time seek to go on anonymously, and this is favoured by a decision-making structure subject to far-reaching dispersal and decentralisation. Thus “decisions” as to the fact of a protest being organised, and as to its level of intensity, often “emerge” from the Internet, sometimes even on the basis of votes called and held (*BBC News*, 29th June 2019). Where organisation is present, it involves several-person groups of friends and colleagues, and it is at this level that the decision to join a protest announced on social media is taken (Ag, 2019). Only with great difficulty are the police able to smash a structure of this kind and profile.



Decentralisation of the decision-making process is a more and more typical feature of ongoing protests noted in different parts of the world. Hong Kong is nevertheless the very clear example that other movements are now following. Most research into today’s protest movements focuses rather on the mobilising role of social media, as opposed to on the influence of such media on a movement’s structure. However, a few studies do show the Internet exerting a real influence on management structure (Bennett, 2004; Bennett and Segerberg, 2012; Anduiza, Cristancho and Sabucedo, 2014; Sloam, 2014). The lack of central leadership is seen to be possible thanks to the involvement of effective, professional activists, as well as the clear defining of tasks (Koustova *et al.*, 2013)<sup>16</sup>. Indeed, it happens that the movements in question come to be seen, not as leaderless, but as replete with leaders, given the dispersed nature of activity.

- (2) The role of social media is key, and a further feature linking up with the movement’s decentralised structure and decision-making processes is the major role of communication online. The aforementioned structure of the movement is also influenced through and thanks to social media. Those who participate in the Hong Kong protests communicate via the *LIHKG*, as well as the encoded *Telegram*. Information is also passed on via documents posted on *Airdrop* disks (Purbrick, 2019). Spectacular success (as measured by numbers of downloads) is also enjoyed by *Bluetooth* technologies (e.g. *Bridgefyi*) that still provide for communication over short distances even when protesters have been cut off from the Internet or denied access to phone networks (*The Next Web*, 3rd September 2019).

- (3) There is a great deal of Internet activity as, alongside their activity via online fora and communicators, Hong Kong protesters prove extremely active in setting up websites devoted to protest, and also – for example – revealing the names of police personnel. Involvement in the virtual world can certainly be associated with the youthful nature of the protesters, and this leads on to further features that may be thought of as linked with the sphere of symbolism.
- (4) An alternative art and graphic culture is taking shape, as young people become very much involved in the development of the protests' visual and musical narrative. Internet fora and discussion groups are filled with graphic art, posters and “memes”, while Hong Kong's “Lennon Walls” have assumed a kind of legendary status since the first (inspired by the original in Prague) appeared in the “Umbrella Movement” context of 2014. Five years later, they were present *en masse* throughout the region. However, protesters have not confined themselves to graphic forms of making their views known, as 2019 also yielded a host of new songs, including *Glory to Hong Kong*, which came to serve as a kind of anthem for the protests. Together, slogans and music build the collective identity of those protesting.
- (5) Adaptive tactics are deployed. Indeed, those commenting on features of the protests often home in on the partisan-type formula espoused. The protesters have given effect to “Be water” – the slogan already referred to at the beginning of this article which harks back to Hong Kong actor and master of martial arts Bruce Lee. It is taken to denote a tactic that combines instant action with adjustment to any situation. The protesters eschew prolonged action, choosing instead to remain mobile.

- (6) There is no choice but unity among those protesting, as they seek to present a united front, with no splitting into separate factions. The maintaining of such unity in the longer term is obviously extremely difficult, especially as the movement continues to radicalise; but it must be conceded that the “do not split” (不割席) slogan has proved possible to pursue for some months at least.
- (7) “Black bloc” tactics have been deployed widely. While it is true to say that successful protest was achieved with these many times in the further past (with the longest history of use characterising anarchist circles), Hong Kong’s achievement has been to professionalise this among a far-wider group of protesters. The crowds gathering thus include large numbers of participants up and ready for physical confrontation with the police, wearing masks (even gas masks) or goggles, and thus able to operate even where tear gas had been fired. Paramedics are also on hand in the crowds, and participants have developed their own sign language to make agreeing on things possible, while some also carried home-made shields.
- (8) An escalation of confrontational tactics has been achieved. The presence of “black blocs” also denotes a readiness to accept more-confrontational forms of struggle. Above we pointed to the growing acceptance of more radical means of protest, and indeed the 2019 situation in Hong Kong did (*inter alia*) see petrol bombs brought into use by those on the streets.
- (9) Care was taken regarding publicity. The achievement of worldwide visibility for the slogans of the Hongkongers (an important matter, given the asymmetry of the Hong Kong-PRC setup) required considerable activity on the aforementioned social media. From the outset, protesters took care to maintain links with politicians abroad, and indeed to seek out foreign backing, *inter alia* via social-media campaigning and even the purchase of advertising space in the

foreign press. Further activity on the part of the protesters includes public collections of money and the promotion of slogans online. Assistance with making the protests resonate more around the world has also been provided by such “nestors” of the protest movement as Joshua Wong and Nathan Law.

## ***7.2. The Escalation of Violence***

When the 2019 protests are set against the 2014 Umbrella Movement, it is easy enough to note a change of tactics, in the direction of the aforesaid appearance of “black blocs” and confrontational tactics. This reflects a growing sense of normative and utilitarian justification for violence among the youth of Hong Kong. From July 2019 on, almost all (95.28 per cent of) people surveyed as the protests were ongoing agreed with the statement that “when the government fails to listen, the use of radical tactics by protesters is understandable” (Lee, Tang, Yuen and Cheng, 2019). Signalled readiness to radicalise activity was also visible in the tactics of localists, e.g. during the February 2016 Mong Kok unrest.

As research seems to make clear, this greater acceptance of violence, and consequent widening of the spectrum of protest instruments to include those of a more disruptive nature, may well reflect the development among angry and disenchanted people of a feeling of disdain for the object of protest; as well as a growing sense of the impossibility of the situation ever changing (and hence a feeling of limited effectiveness) (Wright, Taylor and Moghaddam, 1990).

Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko point to three reasons for group radicalisation, i.e. polarisation, competition and isolation (McCauley and Moskalenko, 2011). Group polarisation emerges in the context of in-group dynamics, with communication within a group leading to mutual learning. Against a background of intensifying internal

debate, members of a group tend to agree about what is discussed, with the effect that, in some sense, the only way out is for some members to resort to more extreme ideas. In essence, group discussion among people with similar views inevitably seems to lead to the airing of more radical ideas (albeit in the same overall direction).

Group competition represents a further reason for radicalisation, as competition with another group not only raises the level of unity and cohesion internally, but also ensures a competitively-derived radicalisation.

The last of the elements referred to – group isolation – is emphasised by the role of the total institution in the meaning of Goffman (1961). The more totalistic a group’s dynamics, the greater its degree of radicalisation.

As they experienced – and became disillusioned by – a lack of progress with democracy, the Hong Kong circles made up of younger people matured through protest action. Developed online discussion fora and enhanced communication among opponents of the HKSAR Government in social media as combined with a deep socio-political division in society, and the enclosure of protesters within their own group allowing the governments of Hong Kong and the PRC (hence also the Communist Party) and pro-Beijing activists to be written off as “them”, to encourage the radicalisation of protest action. But a key trigger was of course the reaction the police displayed to the protests of June 12th.

Radicalisation may also be linked with the already-acknowledged lack of leadership and dispersed decision-making now characterising Hong Kong residents. However, it is important to note that a certain threshold of (excessive) radicalisation has not in fact been crossed – wisely, given that such a step would deprive the protests of their broad base in society.

## 8. Discussion

This article comes forward with a model to account for the outbreak of protest in Hong Kong in 2019. The achieved mobilisation into overt protest can be seen to have resulted from both socio-economic and political grievances growing in a part of Hong Kong society that includes younger inhabitants in particular. Feeding into this were major – and growing – economic disparities (and stratification) within the region, a number of social challenges (including as regards a place to live), and unkept promises on the democratisation of elections (in fact in the face of growing curbs on Hong Kong’s autonomy). The probability of participation in a protest grows as there is more and more experience of this at earlier events, and hence also a growing group identity *inter alia* reflecting improving communication within a group. The Opposition circles steadily taking shape over some 10-20 years have supplied structuring and increased political appeal, while visible brutality on the part of the police made more radical forms of protest appear justified.

The model proposed here is in need of further verification. Moreover, it is hard to say that this is now a closed process, given the way the protest is basically still ongoing. Equally, the empirical research to date does not suffice to fully verify the proposed model, though what is mainly lacking now is work on subjective feelings of economic and political deprivation that protesters themselves manifest.

## Notes

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1. The draft Act did not confine extradition possibilities to the territory of the PRC, but also provided for transfers – via a process of mutual legal assistance – of people from Hong Kong territory to any other place (including regions hitherto excluded from such possibilities, i.e. China, Macau and Taiwan).
  2. Work already published on the 2019 protests includes: F. Lee, S. Yuen, G. Tang and E. Cheng (2019), “Hong Kong’s summer of uprising: From anti-extradition to anti-authoritarian protests”, *China Review*, 19(4), pp. 1-32. doi:10.2307/26838911, as well as Martin Purbrick (2019), “A report Of The 2019 Hong Kong protests”, *Asian Affairs*, 50(4), pp. 465-487, doi: 10.1080/03068374.2019.1672397.
  3. As well as analysis of press articles at the *Hong Kong Free Press* and *South China Morning Post* portals.
  4. More detailed data on the forms of abuse involved are supplied in the report from the Association Concerning Sexual Violence Against Women (<https://rainlily.org.hk/eng/news/2019/11/release>).
  5. It should be recalled that, while the official number of “places” in Hong Kong prisons is around 11,220, as at the end of 2018, the penal institutions

were actually holding some 8,181 inmates (see Hong Kong Correctional Services, <https://www.csd.gov.hk/english/statistics/npuc.html>, and *World Prison Brief*, <https://www.prisonstudies.org/country/hong-kong-china>).

6. Hong Kong became a possession of the United Kingdom thanks to three treaties imposed on the Emperor of China, once the Middle Kingdom had emerged as the loser in several armed conflicts. The 1842 Treaty of Nanking (ending the First Opium War) provided for the “in perpetuity” conferment upon the British of Hong Kong Island. The 1860 Convention of Peking (signed after the Second Opium War) handed over a small part of the Kowloon Peninsula directly opposite the island, as well as the tiny Stonecutter Island. Finally, the second Convention of Peking dating from 1898 (and signed once China had lost its war with Japan) related to the so-called New Territories and a 99-year lease thereof.
7. A term very popularly used in relation to Hong Kong. It gained currency thanks to a June 28th 2000 article in *The Washington Post*, and then gained frequent use in the subject literature, as in Ngok Ma (2009), “Social movements and state-society relationship in Hong Kong”, in *Social movements in China and Hong Kong: The expansion of protest space*, p. 52; Ming K. Chan (ed.) (2008), *China’s Hong Kong transformed: Retrospect and prospect beyond the first decade*; Antony Dapiran (2017), *City of protest: A recent history of dissent in Hong Kong*.
8. Collective identity can be studied by examining the group’s symbols, beliefs and values.
9. According to other data, the 2001–2011 period actually brought a 2.9 per cent fall in median earnings (Pok Yin and Adrian Chow (2015), “The Umbrella Movement: The bigger picture behind and its broader imaginations”, *Cultural Studies@Lingnan*, 47, <http://commons.ln.edu.hk/mcsln/vol47/iss1/4/>, accessed 01.02.2016).
10. Hong Kong’s overall result is seen to be low, given that the *Happiness Index* ranking takes account of such factors as GDP per capita or



corruption, while the HPI considers life expectancy. (Hong Kong does well in all of these areas).

11. About Hong Kong local identity: Yidong Wang (2019), “Local identity in a global city: Hong Kong localist movement on social media”, *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 36(5), pp. 419-433, doi: 10.1080/15295036.2019.1652837. Important source of knowledge about changes in Hongkongers’ attitudes can provide data of Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute (<https://www.pori.hk/>).
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14. Organisations of a localist profile also include the nativists.
15. Posts were coded as follows: (1) aimed at the HK government and HK public institutions (excluding the police); (2) aimed at the police and its activities; (3) aimed at the PRC and CCP; (4) aimed at the same time at the HKSAR government and the PRC; (5) directly motivating to participate in the protests/reminding about the day of protests/indicating international solidarity for protesters; (6) promoting ideas and values guiding protests; (7) relating to both ideas and values and to directly motivate to participate in protests; (8) aimed at the private companies for their connections with the authorities of HK.
16. A leading role of this kind is played by the appeal in the form of the “5 Demands”.

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