

HOW PROTESTS EVOLVE: HONG KONG'S ANTI-EXTRADITION MOVEMENT AND LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE UMBRELLA MOVEMENT*

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This article analyzes the Hong Kong's 2019 anti-extradition movement and how it learned from the unsuccessful lessons of the 2014 umbrella movement. Existing theories, such as protest cycles, spillover, and abeyance provide inadequate explanations of the linkage between these two movements. This article contends that collective learning from the previous setbacks enabled Hong Kong's protesters to launch a more challenging protest five years later. Such learning was made possible because (1) the occupation zones of the umbrella movement served as an incubator for new and experimental tactics that were later deployed, (2) post-occupy organizations sustained a network of participants scattered across different professions that emerged as the mobilizing infrastructure, and (3) in order to avoid the same mistakes, participants recognized the need for more decentralized decision making and tolerance for radical protests.

We need to keep evolving, improving, and
outrunning the enormous machine that confronts us.
~Denise Ho¹

The ability to critically examine one's past conduct and to revise subsequent decisions accordingly—or what social scientists generally refer to as reflexivity—has been seen as a core component of human agency. While we exercise such capacity routinely in our everyday lives, less attention has been paid to how collective actors learn from their own campaigns and devise a new strategy in order to achieve their goals.

Social movements essentially involve a “cognitive praxis” because they produce knowledge about desired changes, and “interactions between contemporary social movements and the ‘old’ ones” are an important source of such social learning (Eyerman and Jamison 1991: 55, 58). Protest diffusion, or the so-called demonstration effect, is no less than a successful effort by movement activists who have taken stock of what has happened in their culturally, politically, and geographically proximate regions and deployed similar tactics. The East European revolutions of 1989 (Ash 1990; della Porta 2014; Kumar 2001), the “Color Revolutions” in the first few years of this century (Bunce and Wolchik 2011), and the Arab Spring of 2011 (Alimi, Sela, and Sznajder 2016; Bayat 2017; Lawson 2015), are among the best-known cases of such cross-fertilization. While learning from neighboring cases has been thoroughly reviewed in the existing literature, less scholarly attention has been devoted to the question of how protesters reflect on their prior engagement and thereby set forth a novel campaign. How the lessons learned from previous protests influence newer ones is the main research question of this study.

This article looks at Hong Kong's anti-extradition movement of 2019 and how it took cues from the umbrella movement that erupted five years earlier and thus evolved into a more powerful challenge to the authorities. The 2019 campaign erupted over an amendment bill introduced by Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government that would allow the transfer of fugitives wanted by the judiciary in the People's Republic of China, be they Hong Kong residents, expats in the territory, or international passengers transferring at the airport. From the time the govern-

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ment announced the revision draft in February 2019, it immediately became controversial as foreign governments, the local business community, lawyers, opposition politicians, and students voiced their concerns. Opponents perceived the amendment as a sinister attempt to undermine Hong Kong's autonomy which had hitherto maintained its colonial heritage of rule of law and judicial independence—in contrast to mainland China where judges are answerable to the communist leadership and law is no more than a political instrument to silence dissidents. As such, the fear of being arbitrarily extradited to China was the initial impetus for this movement.

In June, the dispute flared up as two major peaceful demonstrations attracted one million and two million participants. In a city of 7.5 million permanent residents, the participation ratio was unprecedented, and yet it garnered only a cold response from officials. The government announced a temporary suspension of the amendment on June 15, 2019, but adopted a repressive strategy toward protesters with police crackdowns, mass arrests, and criminal prosecution. While the fear of being sent to China was not lifted, the brutal use of police force and contrived violence from pro-government gangsters further fanned popular fury. During the summer months, the anti-extradition movement grew into territory-wide resistance of such an extent that the Chinese media once hinted at a Tiananmen-style military solution to what they called “sprouts of terrorism”.

While peaceful protests persisted in the form of rallies, demonstrations, general strikes, class boycotts, human chains, boycotting pro-government shops, posting on so-called “Lennon walls”, and collective singing, frontline protesters escalated their use of force over the months. Initially they built barricades to block traffic only, after some time they increasingly threw bricks and Molotov cocktails, vandalized subway stations and pro-government stores, and practiced vigilantism against pro-government assaulters. On September 4, the government finally announced the formal withdrawal of the amendment; nevertheless, such a belated concession failed to subdue the movement which had grown to a full-blown pro-democracy campaign that demanded suffrage election for top leadership and full direct elections for the legislative body.

One month later, the government invoked emergency powers to ban wearing masks in public spaces, which again backfired by inciting protests throughout the eighteen districts, leading to the suspension of services on all subway lines on the evening of October 4. At the anniversary of its flare-up (June 2020), there have been more than 9000 arrests, including 1,808 arrestees who faced criminal charges, more than 300 refugees taking shelter in other countries, more than ten politically related suicides, and several injuries that had resulted in permanent physical impairment. Rumors circulated widely that police killed some young protesters and disguised the murders as suicides, and the government was not able to demonstrate convincing evidence to counter those conjectures. The same went with the accusation that policemen raped female arrestees repeatedly. Over the months, the anger over police brutality emerged as a more salient concern for participants (Lee, Yuen, Tang, and Cheng 2019: 22). The landslide victory for pro-democracy camp in the district council election on November 24 signified the unwavering popular support for the protesters, even though they have increasingly stepped up the use of force and the city's economy went into a recession.

At the time of writing (July 2020), the movement still maintained its momentum after one year of intensive mobilization, although large-scale and intense confrontations became more infrequent after the eruption of COVID-19 crisis in January 2020 and the draconian national security law imposed in July. Its participants diverted their attention to newer arenas, including organizing new labor unions, using newly gained district councils to pressure the government, promoting alternative pro-movement economy (the so-called “yellow economic sphere”), protesting the government's clumsy efforts to deal with the coronavirus epidemic (the reluctance to close the China border and the hasty plan to set up quarantine facilities).

How do we explain the extraordinary tenacity of the Hong Kong protesters? Why have they been capable of deploying such a varied protest repertoire, ranging from hand-in-hand human chains by high school students in uniform to the destruction of subway stations by masked firebrands? What are the sources of such resilience that have enabled protesters to carry on despite attempts by police and mobsters² to repress them? These questions are certainly of vital interest

to Hong Kong and Beijing incumbents, who have repeatedly alluded to so-called “foreign forces” lurking behind the scenes.

In place of such paranoia, this article maintains that the solution to these puzzles lies in how the activists appropriated the lessons of the 2014 umbrella movement. In the following, I will argue (1) the occupation zones in the previous movement functioned as incubators for new ideas that were deemed as experimental and unorthodox at the time, but were later put into practice in the newer movement, (2) the flourishing of post-occupy organizations laid the foundation for mobilizing networks, and finally (3) the bitter ending of the exhausted occupy protest was a painful lesson for participants who had no choice but to pursue a decentralized and disruptive course. In short, Hong Kong’s protesters evolved into a more powerful challenger because they became more resourceful, more connected, and more courageous as a result of critical reflection on their previous experiences.

Research data has come from many sources. For journalistic reports, I rely extensively on online media outlets, particularly the Stand News (<https://thestandnews.com/>). I have been based in Boston and Taipei since the eruption of the anti-extradition movement, and I flew to Hong Kong three times for short-term field observation. Until February 2020, I conducted twenty-three in-depth interviews with participants, including students, union staff, NGO volunteers, opposition politicians, and academics.

THE UMBRELLA LEGACY: SPILLOVER, PROTEST CYCLE, OR ABEYANCE?

On the afternoon of September 28, 2014, policemen launched tear gas to disperse a crowd that had gathered for nearly two days outside the Legislative Council. Prior to that, police used pepper spray to attack protesters who had nothing but plastic wrap, goggles, and umbrellas for self-protection. The crowd fled once tear gas canisters were launched; yet they kept coming back. The escalated use of police force shocked and angered many Hongkongers who had not been previously concerned about the political reform that had been the subject of intense discussion for more than one year. Three noncontiguous occupation zones in Admiralty, Causeway Bay, and Mong Kok immediately came into being. Knowing that their eviction efforts had backfired, the police stopped using tear gas and had to tolerate the defiant presence of thousands of protesters. As what have been seen in Cairo’s Tahrir Square, Madrid’s Puerta del Sol, and New York’s Zuccotti Park, spontaneous and creative activities sprouted in the encampment areas and became a symbol of popular defiance (Gitlin 2012; MacDonald 2002; Maeckelbergh 2011).

What was later dubbed the umbrella movement involved a 79-day occupy protest to demand genuine suffrage of the top leader. Three weeks later, a televised dialogue between student delegates and officials took place without reaching a consensus that was acceptable to both sides. Afterwards, the movement was torn by multiple centrifugal tendencies including moderates who intended to end the confrontation as quickly as possible, radicals who agitated for more disruptive initiatives, and student leaders who struggled to prolong the precarious status quo. Amid pro-government mob violence, court orders, and police eviction, the umbrella movement ran out of steam and finally collapsed without achieving its goal.

The umbrella movement was the largest incident of popular contention since Hong Kong’s handover to China in 1997. Students took up the unfinished democratization project left behind by their senior political leaders. The movement shared many characteristics with other contemporary occupy protests, such as reliance on digital media, the predominance of youthful participants, and the near absence of pre-existing organizations. Given its significance, the umbrella movement has generated a wealth of research literature (Cai 2017; Cheng and Chan 2017; Jones 2017; Lee 2017; Ma and Cheng 2019; Ng and Wong 2017). For social movement students, the umbrella movement raised a number of research questions regarding its genesis. Why did an East Asian city that apparently lacked the political tradition of civil disobedience and took pride in being a world city excelling in expediting the flow of money and goods generate a longer occupy protest than Cairo, Madrid, and New York? Ho (2019) examines Beijing’s ill-attempted control strategies and how

Taiwan's sunflower movement of the same year provided a template for Hong Kong's students to initiate their own action. Lee and Sing (2019) pointed at how the Chinese rule brought about the triple dispossessions, economic, political, and cultural, sowing the seed for the mass revolt.

How is the umbrella movement related to the anti-extradition movement five years later? Scholars have long recognized that social movements are not distinct happenings, but rather interconnected events in the cascading sequence of social change. The existing literature provides three conceptual approaches to understand the relationship between preceding movements and subsequent ones. The first approach to analyze movement-to-movement influence can be subsumed under the notion of "spillover" (Meyer and Whittier 1994), or the phenomenon where a preceding movement's tactics or slogans incidentally inspire a subsequent one. Previous activism bequeaths a legacy of personalized politics in that former participants continue their commitment to change the world in their everyday lives (Ando 2014; Lichterman 1996). Spillover can also be found in some seemingly conservative organizations, such as the Catholic church and the military (Katzenstein 1990) or state bureaucracy (Banaszak 2005). Spillover can occur in an adversarial milieu, a paradigmatic case being how U.S. feminism was born in the endemic sexual discrimination of the 1960s New Left movements and yet shared the latter's ethos of personal liberation (Evans 1979). In short, the spillover notion highlights the fact that a social movement has the potential to ignite new rounds of mobilization in the least expected areas or about completely different issues.

Secondly, the protest cycle approach starts with the premise of a rise-and-fall pattern because intensive protest participation is not easily sustained. Students of the political opportunity structure generally assume opportunity expansion and contraction shapes the dynamic of contention because of the shifting cost of collective action (Chang 2015; McAdam 1982; Meyer 1990; Tarrow 1989), whereas the social psychological approach emphasizes the declining subjective satisfaction in prolonged movement involvement (Hirschman 1982). The protest cycle literature typically considers early-rising movements as innovators who demonstrate the effectiveness of protests, whereas latecomers are more constrained by their predecessors (Snow and Benford 1992: 145-150; Tarrow 1986: 60).

The protest cycle literature marks a significant improvement over the previous "natural history" approach, which implies a more or less mechanic and regular understanding of the ebb and flow of protest activities. Koopmans (2004) contends "protest wave" should be a more appropriate term because it does not carry the connotation of inevitable recurrence. Moreover, the decline of protest activism does not necessarily follow the paths of institutionalization, marginalization, or radicalization since there are more possible scenarios. Della Porta (2013) also argues against the danger of generalization from few select historical cases. Protest waves can be concluded in more open-ended manners.

Finally, the third perspective focuses on how movement activists tide themselves over against political headwinds and sustain their ideological commitment to wait for the next round of resurgence. Taylor (1989) famously coined the term "structure of abeyance" to make sense of how American feminist veterans survived the conservative backlash of the 1950s by building an intimate community among participants. Abeyance highlighted the fact that the talk about movement "birth" or "death" was potentially misleading since a movement could "contract and hibernate" in the face of a hostile environment (Taylor 1989: 772). As such, successfully managing the lessons of defeat turns out to be the key to later participation. If a "fortifying myth" exists that can maintain the allegiance of participants, it is more likely to encourage them to become engaged in future confrontations (Einwohner 2002; Voss 1998).

While spillover, protest cycles, and abeyance explain certain aspects of subsequent dynamics, none of them can adequately account for the linkage between the umbrella movement and the anti-extradition movement. The conclusion of the umbrella movement stimulated a number of campaigns, including a plethora of community-based or profession-based organizations (the so-called post-Umbrella organizations), some new protests (the "fishball revolution" of 2016 being the most prominent),³ young participants' electioneering in the 2015 District Council election and the 2016 elections to the Legislative Council, and localism—advocating independence or self-

determination—as political demands (Lam and Cooper 2018). On the surface, the flourishing of these post-occupy activisms lent support to the protest cycle/wave thesis (the umbrella movement itself being an event in a series of contentions including the 2019 movement) and the spillover thesis (participation being diverted into other arenas). Nevertheless, with the ratcheting-up of government repression since 2016, including disqualifying movement activists from joining the election, not seating six opposition Legislative Council members, disbanding pro-independence organizations, and imprisoning movement leaders, the participation wave unleashed by the umbrella movement appeared a spent force.

Elsewhere, Hong Kong's pro-democracy camp sustained a series of setbacks, such as a revision to the legislature's house rule outlawing filibusters from opposition lawmakers (December 2017), immigration pre-clearance in the high-speed rail station that allowed mainland officials to exercise authority in the territory (June 2018), and the second reading of a law that would punish disrespectful behaviors during national anthem singing up to three years in jail (January 2019). The pro-democracy camp was defeated in two consecutive single-seat by-elections in 2018, which they used to enjoy the upper hand. Clearly, the opposition movement was stuck in the doldrums, which probably in turn enticed the government to propose the controversial extradition amendment without regard for potential domestic and international criticism.

The abeyance explanation mostly applies to the post-Umbrella community and professional organizations because they were formed to address the political situation after the occupy protest. However, these organizations were originally intended to play a proactive role, rather than becoming inward-looking and self-contained communities. At first, they were confident that they could either spread pro-democracy messages to different sectors or localities, or pressure functional constituency lawmakers who had generally adopted a pro-Beijing stand. As movement activism receded, these organizations became less active as a result. Moreover, the abeyance structure as depicted in Taylor (1989) lasted over a decade as the American feminists were forced to sustain the postwar conservative backlash, which is also different from Hong Kong's protesters who only experienced around two years of low tide prior to their next resuscitation.

Spillover, protest cycles, and abeyance only provide partial answers to the rise of the anti-extradition movement. Implicit in the three approaches is an understanding of knowledgeable and reflective agency, which is capable of applying movement tactics in the unexplored arenas (spillover), imitating a novel and successful predecessor (protest cycles), and ensuring survival in a hostile environment (abeyance). The following sections will look at the agency issue by identifying mechanisms by which Hong Kong participants took stock of the umbrella movement.

OCCUPATION ZONES AS A SOCIAL INCUBATOR

The emergence of occupation zones in the recent protests—where people usurped public spaces in their confrontation with the authorities—has become more widespread. Some observers use the term “prefigurative politics” to understand the explosion of spontaneous activities like independent media, soup kitchens, people's libraries, environmentally friendly gardening, and so on because they intend to emphasize that participants literally enacted the vision of their ideal society (Graeber 2013). Nevertheless, not all these spontaneous activities were only for self-expressive purposes; some were adopted for practical purposes. Food provisioning and garbage collection was a necessity for a sustained confrontation, and these activities also created a community of solidarity and sharing symbolically. Moreover, I contend that the occupation zones emerged as an incubator for new strategic ideas that had the potential to be more widely adopted. One participant described her personal experience during the umbrella movement as follows:

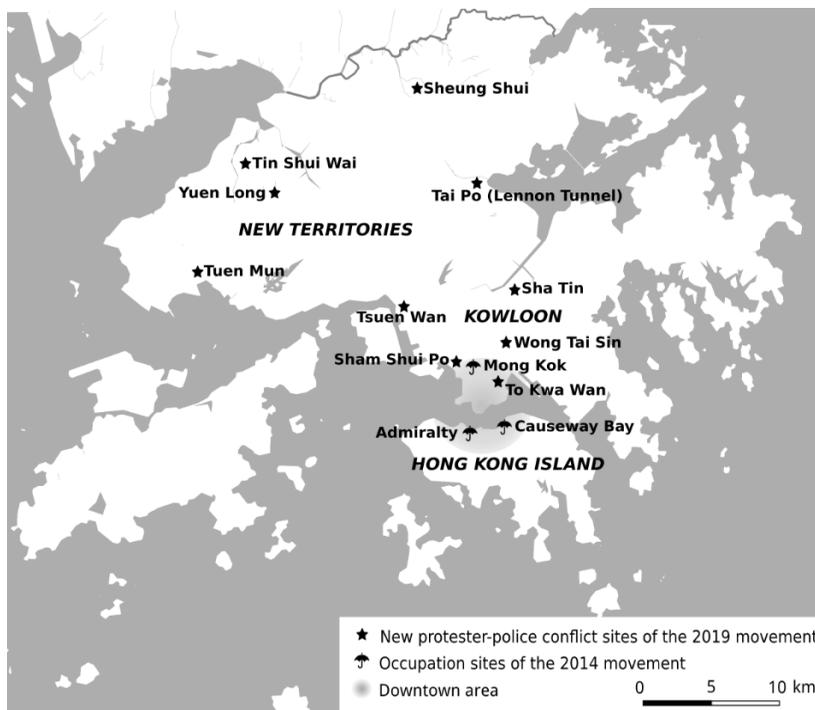
While we were in the occupation zones, we were fantasizing about what we could do. There were some things we wanted to do, but did not put into practice then. We also initiated some campaigns on a small scale. For instance, we often screened documentaries on worldwide protests in the occupation zone, but we did not have the similar screening and discussion elsewhere. There has been talk about “letting flowers blossom everywhere” (*biandi kaihua*) at that time,

but the truth is we failed to bring the movement momentum to different communities. We tried different things and found some ideas were workable. After the Umbrella occupation, we did not have a main battlefield, and that was why each of us had to find his/her own one.

A novel idea born in this social laboratory was that protesters should not constrain themselves to the occupation zones but rather spread demands for democracy to different communities. Particularly when the umbrella movement entered its second month, participants found themselves increasingly on the defensive because they had to fill in the occupation zones with enough people to maintain pressure on the government. In so doing, occupy protesters actually limited their impact on certain urban areas and forfeited the opportunity to involve more citizens. Recognizing this problem, students launched an “umbrella community day” on the day fifty-seven by setting up flyer distribution booths. However, these community outreach initiatives were not successful because they came too late and easily became the target of pro-government mobsters. After the end of umbrella movement, there emerged a spin-off campaign to organize neighborhoods with the slogan “support the umbrella movement by going down to communities” (*chingsan luoqu*). Its proponents maintained that activists should go beyond occupying the streets to “reoccupy our communities.” Many of these activities were parts of the post-Umbrella movements (see below), but clearly there existed an implicit and shared understanding the previous campaign was not successful because its strength was contained in the occupation zones only.

Once the anti-extradition movement emerged, protesters took heed of the need to disperse the protest more evenly across geographic areas. Starting in July, campaigners have launched demonstration in suburban towns, including Tuen Mun, Sheung Shui, Sha Tin, Yuen Long, Wong Tai Sin, Tin Shui Wai, Sham Shui Po, Tsuen Wan, To Kwa Wan, and so on. In the past, political protests tended to be concentrated on Hong Kong Island, particularly in the political and financial hub, Central and Admiralty (see figure 1). A more spatially scattered movement not only made police preparation more difficult, but also facilitated the participation of suburban citizens.

Figure 1: Geography of the Umbrella Movement and the Anti-extradition Movement



Campaigners took care to align their demonstrations closely with distinctive local community grievances. For instance, a demonstration in Tuen Mun (July 6) was framed as a protest against lewd interaction by mainland women in exchange for cash in a local park,⁴ and a demonstration in To Kwa Wan (August 17) emphasized the nuisance posed to local residents due to traffic problems associated with busing of mainland visitor groups. Moreover, since the police was rather indiscriminate in using force, the decentralized pattern of protest mobilization was able to spread out the brunt of police force so as to create a more broad-based participation. Fear of policemen has become an everyday reality even for nonpartisan citizens (Choi 2020), and the brutality left traumatized experiences for many underage children (Cheng 2020). There have been numerous cases in which the police arbitrarily arrested young people and used tear gas in densely populated areas, which has galvanized neighborhood opposition. After the November election, a journalistic report found that the districts that sustained police tear gas assault tended to vote for pro-democracy candidates more than those districts without similar experience—a clear evidence of citizen backlash over police repression.⁵

During the umbrella movement, “Lennon Wall” referred to a section of a concrete staircase in the government complex that was covered with handwritten post-it notes. Since students made up the majority of participants, it was not a surprise that they used such stationery to decorate the occupation zone. It soon evolved into a space for spontaneous expression as well as a powerful artistic project because of the colorful mosaic.

In tandem with the decentralizing trend, Lennon Walls popped up in many localities, particularly in the pedestrian corridors connecting with a metro station. The underpass in Tai Po, a suburban town in New Territories, became famous for its spectacular “Lennon Tunnel”. While there were still handwritten post-its, the new Lennon Walls were decorated more with designed posters that were prepared by professional visual artists and downloaded and printed by local volunteers. Localized Lennon Walls served many functions. They became the community bulletin boards constantly updated with the movement’s progress. For returning frontline protesters, they symbolized a warm welcome after a bruising engagement with the police. Lennon Walls were manned daily by neighborhood activists, who were vulnerable to assault by pro-government supporters. Over the weeks, Lennon Wall volunteers learned the art of not confronting assaulters directly nor physically subduing them for the police because they were usually released afterwards; as such, an “if-you-destroy-one-we-will-post-a-hundred” strategy was later widely adopted so as to minimize the casualties.

As an occupy protest, the umbrella movement was sustained by those participants who were willing to spend time in the occupation zones day and night. Many activities emerged such as street lectures, concerts, sing-alongs, and film screenings so as to transform those seemingly idle hours into a more rewarding time. After the conclusion of the occupy protest, many post-Umbrella organizations held community film screening activities to continue the activism. The anti-extradition movement inherited this tradition by spreading it more broadly. Previously, it was *Ten Years*, a 2015 award-winning film about Hong Kong’s political future that was the most popular choice; later, the screening broadened to include *Lost in Fumes*, a bio-documentary of Edward Leung, a young pro-independence leader, *1987: When the Day Comes*, a South Korean film on the pro-democracy student movement, and *Winter on Fire*, a documentary about the Ukrainian revolution. The widened film selection indicated that participants had become more resourceful in mobilizing video materials.

Like other social movements, umbrella movement participants sang together to demonstrate their solidarity and commitment. In the occupation zone, they sang the Cantonese version of “Do You Hear the People Sing”, “Raising an Umbrella” (a movement song created by professional artists), and other Cantonese pop songs. In the first three months of the anti-extradition movement, participants still sang existing songs. With the advent of “Glory to Hong Kong”, an anonymously created song widely perceived as the territory’s “national anthem”, in late August, a “singing revolution” surged throughout the territory. The song was a battle hymn that glorified Hong-kongers’ courageous pursuit of liberty, and it instantly went viral. People sang the song collectively in schools, churches, a football stadium, and on the ferry. A decentralized movement

encouraged the participants to take advantage of the local shopping malls connected to metro stations. The atriums in these buildings became a ready-to-use arena theater for movement supporters to sing “Glory to Hong Kong” together. The spectacle of hundreds of people gathering on different floors, facing each other, and singing in unison with the knowledge that other Hongkongers were doing the same simultaneously throughout the territory powerfully dramatized their determination. And this would not have been possible, if the new campaign had proceeded as another occupy protest.

Another innovative idea that emerged from the occupation experience was that protesters should go beyond the guiding principle of civil disobedience by masking their identity, fighting back against police, disrupting governmental organs, and challenging the symbols of Beijing’s sovereignty over Hong Kong. Supporters of this strategy were identified as “militants” (*yong wupai*) during the umbrella movement, and they remained marginalized then. In 2014, spontaneous initiatives to interrupt the National Day ceremony (October 1), to blockade public servants from entering their offices (October 3), to storm into the Legislative Council (November 19), and so on were forcibly intercepted by the movement leaders, who denounced these tactics as “irresponsible hit-and-run.” Security team members threatened to arrest them and hand them over to the police, and there were some pro-movement lawyers who announced their refusal to defend these radicals in court. Vandalism of public property was strictly prohibited then. Militants were seen then as unwelcome troublemakers, if not suspected as disguised agent provocateurs.

The militants represented a radical tendency beyond the philosophy of civil disobedience that undergirded the umbrella movement. In the 2016 fishball revolution, a young pro-independence leader Edward Leung advocated a more proactive strategy of “the edge of violence” (*baoli bianyuan*) to entice the authorities into indiscriminate repression by provocative actions so as to awaken popular resistance. Leung paid his personal price by being sentenced to six years in prison, but his ideas was apparently picked up later. The willingness to accept, support, or even engage in disruptive tactics on the part of more moderate participants has been identified as “an ethics of solidarity” (Lee 2019), which represented a clear breakthrough of the tolerable scope of action.

These ideas were heterodox and embryonic in 2014 and came into fruition in 2019. In the first few weeks of the anti-extradition movement, participants quickly adopted the black bloc tactic by fully covering their faces with facial masks, gas masks, goggles, and helmets and dressing themselves fully in black to avoid identification. Protesters avoided using their IC cards when taking public transportation because of the risk of exposing themselves. As a frontline student described, he always prepared different clothing for rallies and demonstrations. When intense confrontations took place, there were always volunteers who distributed masks to other unprotected participants. Free clothing was sometimes provided at metro stations to facilitate protesters fleeing from the scenes of engagement. Another young interviewee mentioned,

I have experienced the umbrella movement when I was a student then. And we knew that it was useless if you just aimed at an appealing picture for being peaceful and orderly. We took the lesson that we should not demarcate ourselves from those militant protesters because we shared the same goal. So there are still some voices of denunciation against certain violent acts of protesters, but it has been much toned down, unlike what we have seen back in 2014.

The anti-extradition movement relied more extensively on encrypted internet platforms such as Telegram and LIHKG, where anonymous users proposed actions and the most popular ones were pushed to the top of the chatroom by the algorithm of responses (Lai and Wu 2019; Ting 2020: 2).⁶ Such decision-making and coordination mechanisms proceeded without the need for a centralized coordinator, which was generally referred to as the “main stage” during the umbrella movement because of the physical presence of a podium in the occupation zone in Admiralty. Then Hong Kong Federation of Students, representing the territory’s university student unions, was widely seen as the movement leadership, and Alex Chow and Lester Shum, emerged as its public faces. A movement without a main stage turned out to be more flexible and adaptive in tactics, and more accommodating to disruptive protests.

As such, more daring actions have been taken in the anti-extradition movement. On the evening of July 1, protesters stormed the Legislative Council by smashing the glass door at the entrance. There they read a pro-democracy declaration before retreating to safety. Sovereignty symbols such as the national emblems and national flag have been defiled in many events, and Beijing's representative presences in Hong Kong, including the Liaison Office, the Bank of China, China Travel Service, Xinhua News Agency, and other pro-Beijing organizations have typically been the targets of vandalism. Such acts of radical defiance were certainly frowned upon by moderates, but they were rarely disapproved of in public by the pro-movement camp.

In sum, the ideas of more evenly spreading the campaign spatially and escalating the confrontation physically and symbolically were already brewing during the umbrella movement, but they were constrained at that time. These suggestions emerged naturally from the participants from their own experiences in the occupation zones, and were only half-heartedly attempted. One might further argue that many protest repertoires in the anti-extradition movement originated from some seminal ideas from the 2014 movement. Participation from high school students in the form of class boycott, human chains, and collective singing dated back to the famous Study Corner in the Admiralty occupation zone, where high school students were encouraged to join and enjoy the free tutoring. The 2019 movement generated a form of "economic warfare" in which protesters profusely patronized pro-movement stores and boycotted pro-government ones. This represented a further elaboration of the "supporting small stores" operation whereby umbrella movement participants encouraged shopping at the stores whose business was devastated by the occupation in Mong Kok. In this way, the umbrella movement functioned as a social laboratory to generate newer movement ideas to be implemented later on.

THE USES OF POST-UMBRELLA ORGANIZATIONS

One notable feature of the anti-extradition movement has been the involvement of different categories of people, arguably one source of its remarkable endurance. Prior to the flare-up in mid-June, students and lawyers launched their protests against the amendment. Mainland migrants, journalists, artists, social workers, schoolteachers, designers, and Christians joined the ranks by announcing their opposition. There has been a persistent attempt to present the movement as an inclusive and broad-based campaign characterized by participants of multiple identities and multiple professions from very early on.

Since the government has adopted a shock-and-awe strategy, the unbridled use of police force incidentally created new victims that enlarged the ranks of the anti-extradition movement. People with visual impairments complained about police treating their white canes as assault weapons (June 14). Thousands of mothers held rallies to protest the police brutality of young protesters (June 14 and July 5). Gender activists denounced sexual violence by the police against female participants and organized a Hong Kong #Metoo rally (June 29, see figure 2 on the next page). Journalists (July 14) and social workers (June 21) held their own silent marches because they were also assaulted by the police. A sit-in by medical doctors and nurses took place on July 26 because police attempts to arrest the injured in hospitals violated their professional creed.

On July 21, hundreds of baton-wielding gangsters stormed into the Yuen Long metro station and assaulted protesters who had just returned from a clash with the police in the city center. For more than half hour, police conveniently allowed the mobsters to reign the station with terror, and many innocent passengers were severely injured. There had been many previous episodes in which the police were suspected of clandestinely collaborating with pro-government triads; however, the Yuen Long Incident lent undeniable evidence to such conjecture, which in turn stimulated a newer wave of mobilization with more participants. The Hong Kong General Chamber of Commerce and thirty-four retired high-ranking officials announced their support for establishing an independent inquiry committee to look into police violence—one of the five major demands of the anti-extradition movement. Book publishers, film directors and screenplay writers,

Figure 2. A #Metoo Rally Poster: “Investigate Police Sexual Violence”



Note: This event was sponsored by Hong Kong’s feminist groups. The poster is an example of visual images created and spread by a number of largely anonymous designers. It encourages protesters to attend a #Metoo rally on August 28, 2019. Accessed November 29, 2019 at https://t.me/hkstandstrong_promo.

aviation industry workers, professional athletes, performance artists, financial industry workers, and football umpires released their own statements or held protest events.

Government employees were the most unexpected entrant into the movement because they were legally required to uphold the principle of political neutrality and duly execute government decisions. An internet campaign emerged in which different categories or divisions of government employees jointly published open letters which denounced wrongdoing by the police and supported the movement’s demands. The endorsement came with a display of photographs of government employee identification cards with the holders’ names being covered. Hundreds of administrative officers and executive officers, the two top grades in the government structure, initiated this campaign, and they were followed by employees at the Fire Services Department, the West Kowloon Cultural District, the Information Services Department, and Radio Television Hong Kong. More surprisingly, dissident public servants also came from the Department of Justice and Security Bureau, which supervises the police. The unprecedented activism within the government led to a rally of public servants on August 2, which purportedly attracted forty thousand participants.

How can we explain the exceptional scope and reach of protest mobilization? True, the indignation at ever-increasing police brutality was the main psychological thrust that motivated participation from various professions. But for this psychological motive to be channeled into protest actions, preexisting organizations usually played a facilitative role. In major contemporary worldwide protests, a preexisting network of interconnected activists has been a critical key to movement emergence (Clarke 2014; Flesher Fominaya 2014; Gerbaudo 2012: 61; Gunning and Baron 2014: 165-166). What appeared to be a spontaneous outburst might be more accurately described as a preplanned outcome.

As said above, in the wake of the umbrella movement, profession-based organizations mushroomed to carry on the unfinished democratization project. Over the years, the intensity of their engagement declined, but upon the outbreak of anti-extradition movement, these post-Umbrella

organizations became active again. These movement veterans provided an infrastructural network to undergird the newer rounds of protest.

Twenty-three organizations based on professions, including accountants, insurance workers, medical doctors, IT workers, and so on, jointly produced a statement to protest the Yuen Long incident. There were cases in which post-Umbrella activists decided not to use their original organizational name, but joined the new Telegram groups or Facebook fan pages that sponsored protest events. For instance, activists from Umbrella Parents, which as the name suggests was comprised of mother and father participants in the 2014 movement, joined the organizing team of the mothers' rallies in June and July. Since Umbrella Parents was generally seen as partisan because of its previous participation in the election, they decided to shelve the organizational name to attract more neutral mothers. There was another reason why these post-Umbrella organizations chose to participate anonymously. Many of them were registered and their leaders were publicly known. Transparency and openness had been intended to enhance the credibility of these organizations when they engaged in policy lobbying or public education. However, such an organizational strategy was emphatically not suitable in 2019 because participants incurred the risk of police arrest or mob violence.

The availability of these preexisting organizations and participants made some protest events possible. In 2014, the umbrella movement leaders called for a general strike, but received a weak response from certain sectors. In 2019, the strike on August 5, which brought about the cancellation of over 150 flights and claimed to have attracted three hundred and fifty thousand participants, was a significant milestone. How did a political strike emerge in highly capitalistic Hong Kong? According to a Confederation of Trade Unions staff, union leaders were initially skeptical.

We know many of our rank-and-file members are angry at the government. But we are a union federation with more than two hundred thousand members. If we initiate a general strike, people would expect us to mobilize at least more than ten thousand people. But we are not sure whether we can meet that expectation.

While union leaders showed hesitancy, young workers who had the personal experience of the umbrella movement agitated for a general strike via the internet platform, and their initiation received enthusiastic responses. In the end, union leaders and staff also joined the campaign without mobilizing their constituencies. The success of August 5 strike was apparently a major breakthrough in that many workers later decided to organize new unions. As of January 2020, more than forty labor unions have emerged, injecting a new impetus to Hong Kong's labor movement. In early February, in a protest against the Hong Kong government's reluctance to close the border during the coronavirus outbreak, Hospital Authorities Employee Alliance, one of the new unions, launched a five-day strike.

In addition, the involvement of different professionals provided vital logistic support to the on-going movement. Spark Alliance, a legal aid organization formed to support the 2016 fishball revolution arrestees, was active in sending out lawyers to different police stations to negotiate the release or bailout of the arrested demonstrators. Field Social Workers were a group of professional social workers who attempted to maintain a buffer zone at the conflict sites so as to moderate the use of force by the police as much as they could.

Professionals were able to open new zones of engagement so as to increase pressure on the government. More than two hundred visual artists and designers joined a Telegram channel that freely circulated their pro-movement creative works, and as many as 150 pieces a day could be easily downloaded for communication purposes. Bank workers with insider knowledge of their industry launched a financial noncooperation movement which encouraged the deposit holders of China-owned banks to withdraw their money and close their accounts. Although there have been no reported incidents of a bank run, Hong Kong's financial regulator was forcibly put on alert for having to monitor the daily cash flow of banks.

In short, in spite of its seeming failure, the umbrella movement bequeathed a wealth of manpower resources scattered across different strata and professions. The anti-extradition

movement was able to mount a more powerful and broadly based challenge partly because it successfully activated these legacies.

DECENTRALIZATION AND UNITY: THE LESSONS OF THE FAILURE

In an interview, one umbrella movement veteran shared his complex reflections on the previous round of intense movement participation. On the one hand, there was a feeling of self-blame because they had missed a valuable opportunity.

Over the past five years, we have tried many ways to do it again. We are constantly thinking of the question: if we were given the chance to do it over again what would be a better way to proceed? This question has been deeply in the minds of many people.

On the other hand, there was a pervasive sense of defeatism because the outcome of the umbrella movement was not a more democratic Hong Kong, but arguably the opposite, if one took the series of repressions into consideration. Similarly a former vice-chairperson of Labour Party, a pro-democracy party, revealed:

My friends in the pro-democracy movement circle believed Hong Kong was not likely to witness a serious movement over the next five to ten years. It was in the low tide, and we were at a loss as to what to do next. I also know many young students in the localist camp shared the same pessimism. Regardless their ideological differences (leftwing, localist, or pan-democratic), the younger generation was particularly saddened and frustrated.

Many umbrella movement leaders and followers underwent a deeply traumatic experience and much soul-searching afterwards. What emerged later was a shared conviction that they should pursue a different strategy to avoid making the same “mistake.” Since the umbrella movement proceeded as student-led civil disobedience, its alternative was no less than a decentralized and militant movement. A participant interviewed by *South China Morning Post* contended, “Occupy is like a mirror . . . We are actually doing the opposite of what we did five years ago” (Ibrahim and Lam 2020: 60).

During the umbrella movement, the “main stage” in the Admiralty occupation zone was managed daily by NGO activists in close collaboration with students, thus symbolizing the leadership. Yet, as the movement became increasingly stuck in a quagmire, students could not obtain satisfactory concessions from the government, or contain the growing restiveness among participants. Towards the later period, several episodes of protest emerged against the main stage and these in-fights further weakened the movement as it was rapidly losing steam. The painful lesson of ineffectual leadership that ended in indecision and distrust was clearly heeded. As a former student leader acknowledged in an interview, a main stage was liable to make mistakes because it assumed too many responsibilities. “Now there is no main stage, the responsibility is on everyone.”

On the surface, the anti-extradition movement shared the same skepticism of leadership with the contemporary global protests, such as the Spanish Indignados movement and the Occupy Wall Street in New York. There existed an unmistakable ethos of decentralization, spontaneity, and bottom-up creativity. However, Hong Kong’s protesters came to adopt this strategic response largely out of their personal reflections of the previous experience. Throughout the confrontation, there was barely any reference to the international cases. Participants often cited Edward Leung, a charismatic young political prisoner, for the rejection of peaceful civil disobedience, rather than foreign movement gurus who advocated for “leaderless movements.” Moreover, the use of “main stage” as a shorthand for leaders, leading organizations, and a commanding center in the rally carries a distinctive local flavor because it refers to the dysfunctional podium erected in Admiralty during the 2014 umbrella movement. The same goes for the “be water” philosophy, which maintains protesters should be flexible and fluid to outsmart, rather than “out-force” the police.

The idea originates from Bruce Lee, a beloved local Kungfu movie star, who used to characterize the essence of martial art as “be shapeless, formless, like water.”

Therefore, the anti-extradition movement emerged with the understanding that no individuals or groups could claim the moral authority over others, and participants were given greater latitude in choosing their actions as they saw fit. In the June 12 besiegement of the Legislative Council that forcibly postponed the extradition amendment, such a pattern of decentralized collaboration had already surfaced. While opposition lawmakers were using legislative tactics to delay the session, a number of independent actions emerged simultaneously on the street. Motorists manufactured minor incidents to create de facto road blockage and Christians sang religious hymns continuously for hours, while masked protesters attempted to storm the Legislative Council.

Hong Kong’s demonstrators used the phrase “as brothers climb the mountain, each has to make an effort” to describe the decentralized pattern. Essentially this involved adaption to new roles for movement organizations and politicians, who were no longer automatically seen as leaders. Activists of Demosisto, a political party led by Joshua Wong, held a number of events to publicize the danger of the extradition amendment before June. Once the movement gained its own momentum, they found it no longer necessary to “initiate events or rallies”, and instead, they readjusted to an auxiliary role, focusing on issues such as provision of resources to frontline protesters or creating video clips to highlight police brutality.

Joshua Wong adjusted to the new role quickly. He was released from jail after a two-month sentence on the morning of July 17, the second prison term for his involvement in the umbrella movement, and in the afternoon he made his appearance in the Legislative Council and spoke to the protesters there. On July 23, as protesters gathered outside of the Legislative Council, he used a microphone to direct the crowd to besiege the police headquarters in Wan Chai, and later on the protest evolved into a spontaneous action to paralyze the neighboring government agencies, including Revenue Tower and immigration headquarters. Joshua Wong was then severely criticized for this attempt to take charge. As such, he learnt not to assume such a high-profile role in subsequent gatherings, but concentrated on an international lobbying campaign in Taiwan, Germany, and the United States.

In the umbrella movement, opposition lawmakers represented a moderate wing that urged students to end the occupation quickly so as to minimize inconveniences. As such, they incurred resentment from younger participants who later voted for candidates advocating localism or self-determination (the latter represented by Demosisto) in the 2016 legislative election, thus suffering a loss in the number of seats. Taking stock of the lesson, opposition politicians firmly stood behind the demonstrators, even on some occasions when the government deliberately made use of disruptive incidents to change public opinion, such as storming and vandalizing the Legislative Council (July 1) and blocking the airport (August 12 and 13). Even when the government finally rescinded the controversial amendment, opposition lawmakers still criticized the concession as not enough (September 4). Younger opposition politicians often appeared at the sites of confrontation; while they sought to reduce tension by negotiating with the police, they largely refrained from preventing protesters from taking more assertive action. A number of them were physically attacked by the police or by mobsters, which undoubtedly drew politicians and militant protesters closer.

The changing roles of politicians and celebrity activists underscored a newly formed consensus of solidarity or ethos of “no division” among moderates and radicals, which essentially entailed a greater tolerance for disruptive action and protesters increasingly resorting to violence. In the wake of the umbrella movement, the advocates of civil disobedience were convicted and jailed one after another, which appeared to indicate the futility of relying on peaceful measures only. At the onset of the anti-extradition movement, the consensus of unity was quickly established since it was patently clear that two peaceful demonstrations of millions of participants were still not enough to change the minds of incumbents. Poll data shows evidence that tolerance of radical protests was increasing over the course of events. According to an on-site survey, the proportion of protest participants who agreed or agreed very much with the statement “radical pro-

Figure 3. “Let Us Not Repeat the Mistake of Five Years Ago, Okay?”



Note: A poster on the danger of division of militant protesters and peaceful ones is shown at the Lennon Wall of Hang Hau. The yellow umbrella on the left represents the umbrella movement and its rejection of disruptive protests, while the couples with helmets and black attire on the right are the newer participants. This picture is intended to encourage more understanding and support from the moderate camp. Author’s photography, October 18, 2019.

tests will antagonize other people” was steadily declining: 54.4 percent in June, 36.8 percent in July, and 34.8 percent in August (Lee, Teng, Yuen, and Cheng 2019: 25; author’s calculation), a clear indication of increasing tolerance of disruptive acts.

In the first two months, protesters largely refrained from using disruptive force. On August 5, Chief Executive Carry Lam held a press conference to condemn a list of episodes of what she called “extreme violence”, including blockading traffic, besiegement of police stations, destruction of public properties, brick-throwing, setting fires, producing Molotov cocktails and firebombs.⁷ After her denunciation, protesters used more aggressive force, such as vigilantism against mobster assaulters (since late August), vandalism of metro station facilities (since early September), and destruction of pro-government stores (since early October). Yet, in spite of the continuing official censure, there has been no visible reversal in public support for the movement— an indication of the enduring consensus of unity. The clearest evidence for popular support comes from the result of district council election on November 24. It represents a resounding victory for the pro-democracy camp, which secured 389 seats (86%) and took control of 17 district councils (out of 18). Previously, the pro-government politicians even though voters would punish the pro-democracy forces for their support for “violence”. Afterwards, it was clear they became the target of public ire, with their seats decimated from 289 to 59.

CONCLUSION

One of the most iconic figures of the 2019 movement is the so-called “firemen” who skillfully used traffic cones and bottled water to neutralize tear gas canisters. Hongkongers jokingly claimed that chemical weapons had become a part of their everyday reality so that it has become a rare privilege to enjoy a weekend without the toxic gas in the long summer of 2019. Such bravery and

stoicism stood in striking contrast to the mass panic and indignation that arose when police officers shot 87 tear gas canisters on September 28, 2014, which gave rise to the umbrella movement. Ironically, in the following 79 days of occupation, police did not fire tear gas, yet the movement ended in exhaustion and a growing schism without achieving its goals.

How do Hongkongers' protesters evolve? Why do they rise from the previous defeat? This article sought to identify the linkage from the umbrella movement to the anti-extradition movement. The existing theoretical approaches of protest cycles, spillover, and abeyance provide insufficient answers to the puzzle of the spectacular rebirth of Hong Kong's pro-democracy movement five years on. In addition, social movement researchers have found that a campaign loss is not necessarily the end of the story, since it can be reinterpreted as a "positive experience of collective identity" to sustain later mobilization (Beckwith 2016: 62). Rather than forging a collective identity, I maintain that Hong Kong protesters internalized the lesson of defeat and thereby became capable of launching a more daring challenge to the authorities.

More specifically, this article identified three main mechanisms of learning: (1) the occupation zones were an incubator for new and experimental tactics which were later adopted, (2) the post-occupy organizations sustained a network of participants scattered across different professions that emerged as the mobilizing infrastructure, and (3) participants recognized the need for more decentralized decision making and tolerance for radical protests. In a word, protesters became more innovative, connected, fluid, and militant, which became hallmarks of their remarkable strength in the face of unrelenting government repression.

The future of Hongkongers' pursuit for political freedom remains undecided. As of now (July 2020), although the anti-extradition movement has not fulfilled all its demands, it has secured achievements that were unlikely at its onset. The extradition bill has been withdrawn, and more than three hundred activists have been elected as district councilors. Also, the U.S. enacted legal measures to punish Hong Kong officials who violated human rights. These advances appear more significant in light of how China's grip has tightened in other regions under Xi Jinping. However, since the 2020 New Year demonstration, there have not been any large-scale collective actions, and intense confrontations between protesters and police have become infrequent. Most of the neighborhood Lennon Walls have been cleansed, and the authorities appeared to have regained lost territory. True, the movement has shown its fatigue, particularly with more than 9,000 accumulated arrestees and hundreds of activists who fled to Taiwan and other safe areas. The coronavirus epidemic also brought about a lull in the battle. There is certainly no foretelling of the finale of the Hongkongers' struggle, but how they reflected on this history-making episode will affect the trajectory of the next round of contention.

The nimble adaptation on the part of protesters is only one side of the story. For a fuller understanding of the dialectic of contention, it is necessary also to analyze the regime's learning curve. On June 30, Beijing unilaterally imposed a national security law despite international condemnation. The draconian legislation outlawed four vaguely worded crimes of subversion secession, terrorism, and collusion with foreign forces. It also implanted mainland security agents in Hong Kong, and threatened to send suspects arrested there to mainland courts. The law has effectively ended the city's semiautonomy, and forced activists to flee to other countries or go underground. Yet, Hongkongers remained defiant as evidenced in the larger-than-expected turnout (607,000) in a primary of pro-democracy camp on July 11-12, which the authorities condemned as a violation of the new national security law. It remains to be observed how Hong Kong's protesters can further evolve in response to the more challenging political landscape.

NOTES

¹ The quote is from Ho (2020: 31). Denise Ho is a Hong Kong lesbian pop singer and campaigner.

² Hong Kong's criminal organizations, generally known as "triads" in the international media, have long been a persistent feature in the city. Originating from mutual-aid societies among immigrant laborers, the operation of triads evolved from petty crimes such as extortion, gambling, and prostitution into modern profit-making business. Beginning in the 2014 umbrella movement, mobsters have involved in the pro-government rallies, and their physical assault upon peaceful pro-

testers was widely noticed. In the 2019 anti-extradition protest, their escalated use of violence and apparent connivance by the police further fanned the public anger. In mainland China, such police-and-mobster collaboration has been a frequent feature when the authorities attempt to enforce an unpopular order, such as land confiscation.

³ The “fishball revolution” was an overnight protest, originating from a resistance against the government crackdown on street food peddlers during the lunar new year holidays of 2016 and evolved into a severe civil unrest, resulting in a mass arrest and sentencing of the participants including the charismatic young pro-independence leader Edward Leung, who received a six-year sentence in prison. Fishballs are a popular snack in Hong Kong, and the name carries the implication that Hongkongers will defend their own way of living despite the Chinese encroachment. The fishball revolution marked the transition of Hongkonger resistance from peaceful civil disobedience to a more proactive form, and the severe punishment bequeathed a lesson for future activists to remain anonymous and skeptical of the judiciary system.

⁴ Hong Kong has traditionally been tolerant on prostitution. The Tuen Mun protest was not about sex for cash payment per se, but rather that mainland Chinese women enticed local men to dance intimately with them in a local park for tips. The unbecoming scene of groping in the public scandalized neighborhood residents.

⁵ *Stand News*, November 25, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2u4H2kS>, assessed February 17, 2020.

⁶ Hongkongers enjoy greater internet freedom than mainland Chinese because they can access Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and other digital platforms that are banned in the mainland. However, after the failure of mask ban in October to curb the protest tide, the government was contemplating the option to shut down some internet media that protesters frequently used. So far such drastic curtailment of internet access has not taken place in Hong Kong.

⁷ *Stand News*, August 5, 2019, <https://bit.ly/32ck08x>, assessed November 5, 2019.

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