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# Universities as an Arena of Contentious politics: mobilization and control in Hong Kong's Anti-Extradition movement of 2019

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines the role of university students during the anti-extradition movement in Hong Kong, analyzing their strategy to mobilize schools' physical, symbolic, and interpersonal resources, and how the authorities reacted by restricting and redefining key resources. Universities have served as a safe space since police officers traditionally are not allowed to enter them. Some schools are also strategically located to allow for more disruptive protests. Since Confucianism venerates the moral value of learning, universities are perceived as a hallowed symbol of intellectual conscience, justifying students' defiance. Universities are commonly seen as warm families whose leaders are obliged to protect students. Finally, universities sustain a rich network of cross-mobilization. The regime restricts access to resources by tightening campus control and reshuffling university leadership, and redefined the symbolic meanings by discrediting higher education. We find interpersonal relationships constitute the most resilient resource because they are embedded in everyday life common identities.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## Introduction

In mid-November 2019, two consecutive episodes of violent clashes at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CU) and the Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU) gained international attention. Student and nonstudent protesters occupied the campuses to blockade traffic in an attempt to bring the city to a halt. The police used teargas, rubber bullets, water cannon, and armored vehicles to disperse protesters to no avail, as protesters transformed the two schools into fortresses and defended them with petrol bombs, arrows, and makeshift catapults. As the crisis unfolded, students, alumni, and citizens volunteered to transport materials to besieged protesters, and initiated independent protests to divert the police deployments. The two incidents lasted five and thirteen days respectively, and resulted in

hundreds of injuries and over 1,300 arrests. In the wake of these events, Hong Kong universities abruptly terminated the remainder of the semester and their Chinese students were swiftly evacuated to the mainland for safety. The shocking scenes of police assault upon institutions of higher education generated broader political consequences as well. In the district council election on November 24, the pro-democracy camp won by a landslide, taking 86% of the seats. The United States Senate expedited the passage of the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act, which had been previously approved by the House of Representatives. Before the PolyU siege was lifted, the law, which promised to sanction human rights violators, became effective.

Globally, university students have long been a vanguard for democracy, and their protests in Bangkok, Beijing, Mexico City, and other places have met brutal suppression. Yet, two university battles in Hong Kong were noteworthy in that the world had rarely witnessed such a frontal assault by fully armored police against students in their own schools since the turbulent 1960s. The People's Park protest in Berkeley (1968), the student occupation of Columbia University (1969), the Yasuda Auditorium occupation at Tokyo University (1969), the Kent State shootings (1970), and the Uprising at Athens Polytechnic (1973) were more deadly in terms of casualties, but they did not engender such immediate domestic and international outcomes. In hindsight, the university battles in Hong Kong represented the culmination of the city's protests against an extradition bill amendment that threatened to send Hongkongers to the People's Republic China courts for prosecution. The movement flared up with two demonstrations of more than one million participants in June 2019 and escalated throughout the summer and the autumn. The protest evolved into a full-fledged pro-democracy movement, taking up the unfinished project of the unsuccessful Umbrella Movement of 2014 (Ho, 2019; Lee & Ming, 2019). Taking stock of the previous incident, anti-extradition protesters avoided occupying public place continuously and adopted a hit-and-run tactic with the so-called 'be water' philosophy initially. However, the university battles marked a major departure from the previous strategy in that protesters abandoned their previous fluid and mobile strategy for the inflexible 'be caste' one, which resulted in mass arrests. In retrospect, some people considered the result as a trap designed by the police to round up the participants in one scoop. The back-to-back university battles marked the turning point of the anti-extradition movement. With so many injuries and arrests, protesters were no longer able to pose a threat to the authorities with aggressive actions. Soon, the onset of the COVID-19 crisis in January 2020 and the imposition of the draconian National Security Law in July made it practically impossible to continue disruptive protests.

The extraordinary protest movement in Hong Kong has attracted scholarly attention around the globe, as researchers scrambled to identify sources of the mass insurgency (Lee et al., 2019; Sing, 2020). Some suggested that a rising Hongkonger identity amid growing infringement by a more assertive China into the city's guaranteed autonomy has fueled protests in recent years (Matthews, 2020; Wu, 2020). Other analysts look at growing economic inequality and class discontent (Au, 2020, pp. 122–132; Chan et al., 2020; Chan & Pun, 2020). The movement evolved as lessons learnt in the Umbrella Movement encouraged participants to engage in more innovative tactics (Ho, 2020; Ku, 2020; Lam, 2020; Li & Whitworth, 2021). In addition, Hong Kong's movement participants demonstrated an unmistakably youthful profile (Ho & Choi, 2020). According to on-site surveys from June to August 2019, 57% of demonstration and rally participants were under the age of 30 (Centre for Communication and Public Opinion Survey, 2019, p. 12). As of May 2020, more than 9,200 Hongkongers had been arrested, and among them 70% were under 30 (Initium, 2020).

Globally, disgruntled youth have been at the forefront of protest movements from the 2010–2011 Arab Spring onward. The youth bulge in developing countries and the lack of economic opportunities in developed countries have aggravated the prospects for the younger generation. 'Over-educated', yet cosmopolitan, and digitally connected young people who are facing a dire future as permanent precariat make up the main contingent of protesters (Della Porta, 2015; Milkman, 2017; Standing, 2011; Tejerina et al., 2013). As residents of a hyper-globalized world city, young Hongkongers experienced the acute pain of economic deprivation triggered by skyrocketing housing prices. Nevertheless, there has been insufficient attention paid to the fact that many youthful participants were also students who made creative use of their particular status to launch a remarkably resilient movement. Certainly, the Hong Kong's anti-extradition protest cannot be reduced to a student protest only, as evidenced by the participation of different sectors of citizens, including journalists (Yeung, 2020), medical workers (Li & Ng, 2021) and other professionals. Unlike the preceding Umbrella Movement, in which students emerged as the legitimate leaders among participants, the anti-extradition protest proceeded as a seemingly 'leaderless' movement. Yet, even without the leader role, students' situation was of vital concern to those who were sympathetic to the movement cause. During the PolyU siege, entrapped student protesters were vulnerable to a police frontal onslaught anytime, and thus giving rise to counter-besiegement efforts on the part of citizens, including the daring episode of 'motorcycle rescue.'

This article analyzes how Hong Kong university students took part in the anti-extradition movement, bringing higher education institutions into the arena of contentious politics. While secondary school students were also

extensively involved, that lies beyond the analytical scope of this paper. By focusing on the role of college student protesters, we emphasize the multiple functions of universities in contemporary societies, and how they become the stakes in an ever-widening conflict. Our research will highlight the student strategy to mobilize the physical, symbolic, and interpersonal resources, and how the authorities reacted by restricting and redefining key resources. Bringing higher education back into the analysis, we believe, is helpful in broadening our understanding of Hong Kong's democratic movement.

### Universities as a Cluster of movement resources

Ever since Clark Kerr's famous characterization of universities as 'multi-universities' in the early 1960s, the multi-faceted role of higher education in training professionals, generating new knowledge, and servicing national needs has been well acknowledged. More than half a century later, the functions of universities have further expanded to include facilitating international exchange, embodying national prestige, and developing social responsibilities. University leadership has struggled to meet these highly diversified, sometimes contradictory expectations, and in so doing, they garnered more resources for their institutions from governments and the public. Moreover, as the gross enrollment ratio for tertiary education underwent a worldwide rise, being a university student was no longer a prerogative for a selected few, but an increasingly common experience for young people who could afford to spend their prime years in being economically 'unproductive.'

As universities have become more resourceful and come to occupy a central place in the formative years of more young people, it should not be a surprise that youthful dissidents often evoked their educational membership when they took part in protests. To make sense of the advent of the 1960s New Left movements in the West, marcosociologists, such as Daniel Bell (1973), Alvin Gouldner (1979), and Alain Touraine (1977), posited that contemporary knowledge production had become a pivotal, yet contested site for social reproduction. Widespread university unrest foreboded a new class of 'intellectuals' in the making. While acknowledging the insights gained by investigating the generation of student activism from the context of broader social changes, this article focuses more on the 'how' questions, rather than the 'why' questions (Snow et al., 1980, p. 799). In other words, we are not so much concerned with the changing roles of universities and the meaning of student revolts, but with the process in which universities are drawn into the crossfire between protesters and the authorities. Under such emergency situations, universities become a high-value stake in the conflict, vulnerable to violence coming from both sides.

Social movements are the organized actions that largely rely on unconventional methods to achieve a collective goal. Typically, disfranchised people resort to social movements because they are excluded or marginalized in the existing arrangement, which explains why protest, an extra-institutional activity, becomes the weapon of choice for the weak. This article follows the mobilizational approach in seeing social movements as a rational and strategic pursuit. This perspective first emerged in the 1970s under the rubric of ‘resource mobilization theory’ (Tilly, 1978; Zald & McCarthy, 1994) and then evolved into the dominant theory in social movement studies even though the original label has faded into disuse. As its early proponents explicitly said, this theoretical approach ‘depends more upon political sociology and economic theories than upon the social psychology of collective behavior’ (Zald & McCarthy, 1994, p. 16). The initial decision to emphasize the strategic aspects and external resources was criticized for the narrow emphasis on material interests (Fireman & Gamson, 1979), the neglect of identity politics (Cohen, 1985), the insufficient attention to political process (McAdam, 1982), and so on. Yet, resource mobilization theorists appeared to anticipate these criticisms by characterizing their perspective as ‘a partial theory’ (Zald & McCarthy, 1994, p. 39), with the implication that its key concepts including strategy, resources, and mobilization could be more broadly defined. Subsequently, the mobilizational perspective expanded by absorbing these insights and grew into one of building blocks of the integrated paradigm of ‘contentious politics’ (McAdam, 1982; Tilly & Tarrow, 2007).

Fundamental to the mobilizational perspective is that analysts should adopt the viewpoint of protest participants and make sense of their strategizing. The term ‘mobilization’ has an etymological origin in financial and military action, and the conceptual choice reflects a deliberate emphasis on the purposive nature of social movements. According to Tilly and Tarrow (2007, p. 219), mobilization is best viewed as the ‘process whereby a political actor gains control over resources that are vital for political contention.’ However, what are the resources in question? Understandably, protesters intend to collect money, increase the number of their adherents, garner media attention, and obtain the endorsement of politicians and celebrities so as to have their voices heard by the authorities. All these efforts are conducive to the desired goal of social movements. As such, resources refer to a number of things, both tangible and symbolic, as long as they have a bearing on the outcome of the contention. While there has been criticism over the excessively inclusive definition of resources (Kitschelt, 1991), we tend to think it is rather a necessary price for the conceptual flexibility since social movements are a highly heterogeneous phenomenon, which calls for contextualization when it comes to different research issues.

The Hong Kong anti-extradition movement is a city-wide resistance against the erosion of its political autonomy. If measured by the number of votes for pro-democracy candidates in the November 2019 local election, the movement enjoyed a solid majority of 57%. As outlined above, young Hongkongers were at the forefront of the prolonged protest activisms, and if they happened to be college students, they were sure to bring their institutional affiliation to the contention. Physical, symbolic, and interpersonal resources pertaining to their schools turned out to be of critical importance.

### *Physical resources*

Universities are the physical buildings and space designed for teaching, researching, and accommodating staff and the student population as a community. For students in Hong Kong, their dormitory represents a 'home away from home' since the city's young people often gain their personal freedom from parental supervision upon entering college. Student associations are often allowed to control certain spaces with 24-hour access (Hong Kong Baptist University Students' Union, 2019). Young protesters found their schools a convenient place to stash their protest gear (face masks, goggles, and black attire) to avoid police arrest.

Hong Kong's universities typically hire their own security guards, providing a relatively safer place for mass gatherings that are not tolerated by the authorities. Police officers find it more difficult to carry out their orders when events take place on campus. Pro-movement legal professionals contend that universities are 'private areas' so that police action requires court-issued warrants and the consent of school administrators, but the police have rejected this legal interpretation in practice. The existence of different legal understandings made it such that police faced more constraints when operating on campus, as compared to shopping malls and private housing estates. Moreover, the global norm of academic freedom restrains police action since the mere presence of such action on campus is easily seen as a violation of this cherished principle, resulting in reputational damage to the government.

### *Interpersonal resources*

Universities are typically the place where young adults spend their formative years and gain their enduring worldviews. Collaboration with peers is an integral part of their learning process, and schoolmates become lifelong friends or partners. Furthermore, in Confucian societies, a familial understanding of universities prevails, and 'the school as a big family' is a frequently heard expression. In student parlance, seniors are typically

addressed as ‘elder sisters’ (*size* 师姐) or ‘elder brothers’ (*sihing* 师兄). In a protest movement, these school-based connections provide a ready-to-use network to encourage participation.

Schools make an effort to cultivate an *esprit de corps* among their students, which develops into a lifelong identity that many graduates embrace with pride. In student self-governing bodies, it is common that previous members (so-called ‘old ghosts’ (*lougwai* 老鬼)) volunteer to help even after they have long left the schools. Hong Kong university alumni organizations tend to be led by conservative politicians and businesspersons as expected, but there are always sympathetic alumni who are willing to donate resources to student protesters when needed, or join petition drives and other activities.

The vertical relationship between students and their teachers is also important. From the student perspective, personal acquaintanceship with professors can be utilized as a means to persuade lecturers to join protest activities or treat lightly any episodes of class absenteeism or missed assignments. The traditional Confucian perspective bestows an all-embracing duty upon teachers, who are supposed to behave as ‘parents’ in the school, and this expectation sits jarringly with the modern understanding of professors as knowledge specialists. Such paternalism certainly constrains student behavior toward the school leadership, but it can also be appropriated by students when their target is the government. University presidents as *patres familias* become morally obliged to protect their students, even if they do not approve of the movement personally.

### **Symbolic resources**

Institutions of higher education are the carriers of positive values including science, innovation, and progress. Oftentimes, elite universities are seen as ‘national champions’, serving as incubators of leadership and as ‘cultural ambassadors’ in the international arena. University students, particularly from prestigious schools, represent the upwardly mobile sector of youth, who are expected to take up leadership positions in the future. As such, a student protest carries more weight than say a similar action by workers or peasants, because their voices will be listened to more attentively.

In France, students of prestigious *grandes écoles* are the ‘inheritors’ of an elite culture that originated before democracy (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979; Bourdieu, 1996). In Chinese societies, Confucian values elevate the social and moral status of learning. Hong Kong venerates higher education and its teaching, particularly because its elite graduates are often seen as modern successors of the Chinese literati. From the imperial era onwards, Chinese intellectuals have been perceived as embodying the nation’s moral conscience; their remonstrations to power are usually glorified in history



textbooks. From the 1919 May Fourth Movement to the 1989 Tiananmen Movement, a fairly established cultural script of student patriotism has emerged, whereby selfless devotion to the national cause is held up as a positive example (Israel, 1966; Wasserstrom, 1991; Wright, 2001). Many of our student interviewees embrace this enlarged understanding of the social roles of universities. For them, schools are about more than the cultivation of talents; they also have the duty to speak out against injustices.

Since its foundation in 1958, the Hong Kong Federation of Students (HKFS) has been the leading voice of university students, playing an active role in social movements. HKFS is an independent organization with its own financial assets, and its governing structure incorporates the affiliated student unions of different universities. In the colonial era, HKFS challenged former Prime Minister of the UK Margaret Thatcher during the 1982–1984 Sino-British negotiations; after the handover to Chinese sovereignty in 1997, it remained defiant by taking part in the annual vigil for the Tiananmen Incident (Ortmann, 2012). Evidence of this enlarged role in society lies in the fact that HKFS was generally accepted as the leadership of the 2014 Umbrella Movement even though students only represented a minority of those in the occupy zones (Cheng & Chan, 2017, p. 5). It could be argued that because of the salience of a continuous student movement led by the HKFS, Hongkongers developed an idiosyncratic use of the term *xuejie* 學界 (the world of learning), which refers to student representatives and leaders, whereas in mainland China and Taiwan, it applies more to scholars and professors.

Hong Kong's university unions typically possess revenue-generating assets and enjoy financial independence. These fiscal resources could be devoted to the movement's purposes. For instance, The University of Hong Kong's (HKU) Student Union earmarked one million Hong Kong dollars (129,000 United States dollars) for the legal defense of student protesters (Mingpao, 2019). The self-governing student bodies of other universities also took similar action in mobilizing their financial resources.

Compared to those in the same age cohort without school affiliation, students possess a wealth of physical, symbolic, interpersonal, and other resources. Their skillful exploitation of these advantages gave strength and resilience to Hong Kong's anti-extradition movement. Their intensive reliance on school membership invited repressive attempts from the authorities to restrict and redefine the students' relationship with their schools, engendering a dialectic of mobilization and demobilization over these resources.

## Research data

Our research data comes from in-depth interviews and documentary sources. From June to September 2020, we interviewed thirteen university student union members and nine student press journalists. Interviewees are recruited through either researchers' personal network or contact through social media platforms, such as student unions' Facebook page or telegram channels. Except for five interviews that was done by texting via end-to-end encryption online platforms, we carry out the rest interviews in a face-to-face setting. Our sample includes twelve males, five females, and five persons with whom we do not have data because of the reliance on internet communication. At the time of interview, one was a full-time worker, two were graduate students, and nineteen were still undergraduate students. Our questions primarily focused on their personal involvement in the movement and their relationship with school administrators. All the interviews were manually transcribed into Chinese text, and the files were anonymized in order to protect the interviewee identity. We had obtained the institutional review board's permission to collect oral data (NTU-REC 202106HS023), and we followed the designated procedure to conceal the identity of interviewees and to protect their safety. We also collected second-hand information from various media outlets and social media platforms.

Our observations are limited to eight public universities that received public subsidies from the University Grants Committee. There were other public and private higher education institutions in the city and their students were equally involved in the movement protests. A well-known example will be Joshua Wong, who maintained his student affiliation with the Open University of Hong Kong until his graduation in October 2020. By adopting a narrower focus, we hope to shed light on the common experience of Hong Kong university students.

## University as a protest site

The existence of free space is vital for protest activism (Polletta, 1999). The secluded yet accessible university campus provides a safer place than the streets for students to launch activities. After the 1997 handover, the Hong Kong government criminalized 'unlawful assembly', as gatherings of more than 50 people and demonstrations of more than 30 people required police approval. As the anti-extradition movement unfolded, the police became less willing to grant permits. Movement participants took more legal and personal risk in joining unauthorized rallies in the streets.

On September 2, 2019, in response to the call for the territory-wide 'three strikes' activity (labor strike, closure of shops, and class boycott), around thirty thousand students gathered in the University Mall of CU and formally

kicked off their two-week boycott action with an elaborate ceremony. This was the largest gathering within school premises in the 2019 movement. By comparison, Hong Kong's high school students also launched their class boycott campaign on the same day. Without a sufficiently large and accessible campus, the latter had to stage their rally in a public square, incurring the risk of being dispersed by the police.

Students organized commemorative events for the deaths that occurred in relation to the movement: A student at the Education University of Hong Kong (EdU) committed suicide after leaving a note with movement demands on June 30, and a week later, another alumna followed suit. EdU student leaders immediately launched two mourning events on the campus. They decorated the site with protest banners, and mourners were encouraged to pay their respects to the deceased by offering flowers.

Chow Tsz Lok, a student at Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (UST), was pronounced dead on November 8, five days after he fell from a garage tower. Chow's death remained an unsolved mystery, but many people believed it was related to the police action. The tragedy added fuel to the anti-extradition movement, culminating in the two university battles mentioned above. UST and other universities immediately saw the emergence of altars and mourning activities including prayers, candlelight vigils, sit-ins, and wreath laying.

Students were allowed to conduct their activities within the school more or less freely. An EdU student activist revealed that they did not apply for permission for the mourning event, and campus security guards even lent them a hand with site decoration. Another CU student activist told us about his experience,

‘The school administration certainly did not endorse our activity, but since we let them know our plan in advance, they could not but accept what we were going to do to a certain extent. We anticipated that they would issue a formal statement to oppose our activity. Since both sides knew the mutual intentions and the bottom lines, it was a kind of “communication”’ (#8 interview).

Students enjoyed better protection for their freedom of speech than those off campus. While ‘Lennon Walls’, public spaces where people could post pro-movement post-it memos and posters, were constantly destroyed by pro-regime supporters or sanitation workers (Li & Liu, 2021), similar installations on campus persisted with fewer difficulties. Occasionally, nationalistic mainland Chinese students defiled these campus Lennon Walls, and such vandalism was often caught on the spot, with perpetrators besieged and confronted by more numerous native students.

More offensive action also took place on campus. Militant students made petrol bombs by using chemical materials from research labs and stashed them in some corners. Turnstile jumping and throwing Molotov cocktails



**Figure 1.** The Location of Universities in Hong Kong (made by authors).

occurred in the schoolyard for the training purpose. Two university battles actually began as protesters escalated their confrontation from November 11 to protest Chow Tsz Lok's death. Previously, road blocks usually took place late at night, but protesters decided to bring the city to a halt with early morning barricades. In line with the new tactics, the location of CU and PolyU became strategically important (see [Figure 1](#)). CU sits at the choke point of Tolo Highway and the East Rail Line that connects the city center with mainland China. Protesters based in CU blockaded these two traffic arteries, and shut down passenger and cargo flow intermittently for five days. PolyU is located at the entrance of the Cross-Harbour Tunnel, the underground passage linking Hong Kong Island and Kowloon Peninsula. By setting up barricades and destroying tollgates, protesters drove the life-line out of service for 10 days for the first time since its opening in 1972.

In that heightened week of conflict, the thoroughfares near City University of Hong Kong (CityU) and Hong Kong Baptist University (BU) were also littered with pulled-up pavement tiles and became impassable to motor vehicles. Both schools are located in an area without geostrategic significance, and thus these barricades did not invite a police counteroffensive.

## Activating School-based ties

Prior to the explosion of mass protest in June 2019, a citywide online petition campaign was already underway to oppose the proposed extradition bill. A study found 478 petitions on the Internet, and 43 of them were based on the identities (students, faculty members, or alumni) common in tertiary institutions (Yuen and Tong 2021). In the two peaceful large-scale demonstrations in June, many student participants carried flags from their institutions, and alumni were often happy to join the contingents of their juniors. As the movement momentum picked up, concern groups among students in the same departments or colleges proliferated and were engaged in various kinds of protest activities.

One episode suffices here to showcase how students creatively exploited their membership and ties. In the late-evening hours of July 21, hundreds of pro-regime gangsters assaulted train passengers in a suburban station in what became known as the Yuen Long Incident. Stick-wielding assailants beat up anyone whom they identified as protesters, and police officers were conveniently absent from the scene and even rejected the victims' calls for help. The incident threw into sharp relief the collusion of police with triad members, and became a major turning point in the movement.

With its location in Tuen Mun in the remote western New Territories, a mere three train stops away from the epicenter of the bloodshed, Lingnan University (LingU) was deeply affected by the incident. A controversial pro-Beijing lawmaker happened to be filmed shaking hands with mobsters prior to the assault, which many people thought as indicative of official complicity. As that lawmaker was a sitting member of the governing body of LingU, students quickly launched a campaign to demand his removal. A petition with the signatures of more than 3,800 students, teachers, and alumni was sent to the school leadership.

One week after the incident, an unauthorized rally called 'Reclaim Yuen Long' took place. Because the police refused to grant a permit, netizens came up with a number of 'reasons' to visit the suburban town, including buying 'sweetheart cakes' (a local specialty), joining a Buddhist pilgrimage, playing Pokemon GO, and so on. LingU students also launched a 'homecoming day' for their alumni. Since LingU was geographically close to Yuen Long (see [Figure 1](#)), many students and alumni joined the rally and urged University President Cheng Kwok-hon to join as well. Why did alumni decide to join this activity? According to one LingU student interviewee,

'I guess it must be related to our sentiments ... Our small class has around twenty students only. We have close ties among students and with professors. We have developed a strong attachment to LingU and will not allow that person to trample on our reputation, even though we are a small

school. He has given us a bad name, and we feel very ashamed. That is the reason why so many students and alumni joined the protest . . . LingU is like a small family' (#13 interview).

As a pleasant surprise, Cheng and school leaders came to Yuen Long to accompany students and alumni. Cheng stayed there for around thirty minutes and reminded the students to remain peaceful. According to one student activist,

'It was a good thing to secure the participation of the university president because at that time other university presidents were criticizing the movement for being violent. His presence proved that we were peaceful, and made the government look really bad' (#20 interview).

### The use of student status

After the unsuccessful conclusion of the Umbrella Movement in 2014, a wave of walkouts emerged at the HKFS. As four universities voted to leave the HKFS in 2015, the student federation was dealt a serious blow and forfeited its claim to represent territory-wide students. After the anti-extradition protest flared up, student activists immediately recognized the need to present a common voice in the international arena. In July 2019, the Hong Kong Higher Institutions International Affairs Delegation (IAD) was established with the participation of 11 university student unions. In a sense, IAD took up the functions left behind by the weakened HKFS, particularly regarding the area of international lobbying. In September, one IAD student delegate joined a United States congressional hearing session alongside three other Hongkongers. The event clearly indicated that student status remained a useful resource for international lobbying.

Student press journalists were another noteworthy example of how movement participants made innovative use of their student status. Many Hong Kong university student unions sponsored student journalists as a part of their training program, and these reporters-in-practice were given greater latitude in selecting their topics and writing their reports than their peers in commercial media outlets. With the school-issued certificates, these young journalists felt that they were justified in venturing into the frontline of violent conflicts. Less encumbered by the norm of balance, they were more willing to present the police atrocities they personally witnessed. Therefore, reports by student journalists turned out to be the authoritative eyewitness account of some violent episodes. For instance, on October 1, protesters launched a city-wide protest against the National Day. One young participant was shot with live ammunition by a police officer at close range though the former did not pose an immediate threat. An HKU journalist captured the shooting in its entirety, which exposed the falsehoods of police spokespersons. In addition, student journalists tended to post their

observations in social media, such as Facebook and Instagram, unlike professional journalists. As such, the reports of student journalists turned out to be widely read in some instances.

### Pleading for school authority

As mentioned above, the Confucian conception of school as a family assumes a hierarchical relationship between administrators and students (Pye, 1988). Such paternalism also entails an implicit reciprocal exchange in that students are willing to demonstrate their deference to authority only insofar as the latter magnanimously grants protection. Once school leadership is perceived to have defaulted on its moral duty, the school-as-a-family understanding immediately ceases to apply and students are then entitled to act rebelliously.

The deteriorating relationship of BU students and their school leadership is a clear case. Keith Fong, the student union president, was arrested twice on minor charges in the summer of 2019. Apparently, the police targeted him in particular for being a student leader. On September 15, when a BU student press journalist was arrested for carrying a butter knife for the mid-Autumn Festival mooncakes in his backpack, student anger exploded. The next day, students held a campus demonstration to demand the school intervene for his release. The BU president happened to be away from school that day. After hearing the vague prevarication on the part of school leaders, enraged students trashed the floor where the university president office was located, destroying the closed-circuit televisions and door locks.

CU is another example of how students successfully made strategic use of their dependent relationship with school authorities. Sylvia Choi (a pseudonym) was a CU student in early childhood education. She was arrested and sexually violated by the police. Sylvia spoke of her experiences in a number of press conferences without revealing her identity at the beginning. In a public meeting with CU President on October 10, Sylvia claimed that she grew up in a family marred by domestic violence and had seen CU as her only family (Liberty Times, 2019).

‘I wish this family could have cared more about us who are arrested. I hope this family shows sincere concern and cares about our safety. When we are beaten and suffer sexual violence, you (the President) can express your concerns about us, rather than just expressing a condemnation that we broke a glass door.’

At that moment, Sylvia took off her face mask and continued,

‘Mr. President, I have the courage to take off this face mask. Could you please have the same courage to walk with the students in condemning the police violence against arrested people, including CU students?’ (Liberty Times, 2019)

After hearing the audacious confession, the CU President Rocky Sung-chi Tuan decided to have a private meeting with students. CU later issued a public letter that largely supported the student action, which again stressed the familial relationship.

‘Every student, regardless of his/her political stance, values or personal beliefs, and whether or not he/she might have done something wrong, is a family member of CUHK.’ (Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2019)

The letter endorsed the call for an independent inquiry into police, one of the key demands of the anti-extradition movement. With his symbolic assumption of parental duty, Tuan, who was previously denigrated as a dog for his political subservience, was suddenly transfigured into ‘Daddy Tuan’ (段爸), who genuinely cared about students. It is significant that Tuan changed his mind only after the secluded meeting with students. As a CU activist revealed,

‘Students were then so anxious and they wanted to talk directly to the President. They had endured so much hardship, and they wanted to talk to “adults” in the school. The adults here are the President. Student protesters were powerless, and what they said was easily ignored by society. So when they talked to the President, half of time they were expressing their personal feelings’ (#22 interview).

Another interviewee explained Tuan’s changed attitude with a familial analogy,

‘He is just like an old person who always tries to think of the best for students. He has the characteristics of a grandfather . . . If you criticize him in public, he is sure to behave like seniors. He acts angrily to defend his dignity. But in the closed meeting, students were crying the whole time. When a senior sees children in tears, he understands and softens his attitude’ (#8 interview).

A month later, when CU became a fiercely contested battleground, Rocky Tuan and former CU President Joseph Sung Jao-Yiu appeared on the scene. They intervened to negotiate with protesters and the police. Tuan hoped to broker a peace deal so that police would stay clear of the campus compound, and protesters would stop blockading traffic, and the school would offer legal assistance to the arrested students. When Tuan was trying to persuade the students, police suddenly launched a teargas attack. That a university president was assaulted with chemical weapons made Tuan an even more cherished parental figure among students.

CU was a unique exception in that the school proudly maintained a tradition of student activism to the point that some students gladly accepted the moniker ‘Rioters’ University’ (暴大). Tuan’s intervention was likely a result of accommodating such an expectation. However, for other university presidents, they could afford to ignore the students’ pleas. Such was the case of PolyU President Teng Jin-Guang. During the second university



battle, Teng repeatedly refused to meet student union leaders, and he did not even make a public appearance when his school literally went up in flames. Teng sent a callous internal email to the effect that the campus had been occupied and destroyed by ‘radical outsiders.’ Clearly, it had not occurred to him that some of the besieged protesters were also PolyU students.

Pleading for protection might seem a gesture of weakness, which apparently deviated from the display of worthiness, unity, number, and commitment, which Tilly (2004, p. 4) identified as the conventional repertoire of social movements in the Western context. Yet, in a Confucian setting, such strategy made sense. By acknowledging the paternal authority of university leaders and begging for their help, students were leveraging a cultural resource that morally obliged university leaders to intervene.

### **Repression by restricting and redefining resources**

The anti-extradition movement represents the largest and most violent anti-regime challenge after Hong Kong became a Chinese city in 1997. In terms of number of arrests (9,216 arrestees as of June 30, 2020) and duration (17 months as of November 2020), the movement surpasses the insurgencies against British colonial rule, including the 1925–1926 Canton-Hong Kong Strike and the 1967 Riot. The government put forward a number of unusual repressive measures, such as a ban on facemasks in October 2019. After the outbreak of the coronavirus epidemic, the government banned all gatherings and postponed the legislative election. Beijing decided to impose the National Security Law to crack down on the vaguely defined crimes of subversion, secessionism, terrorism, and collusion with foreign forces. This draconian measure put an end to the promised high degree of autonomy.

While the authorities aimed at rooting out street protests, peaceful or not, a number of repressive measures were implemented to reestablish control over universities, which had become a hotbed for radical activisms. The mobilizational perspective is helpful to highlight these control strategies designed to restrict resource access.

In the wake of the two university battles, many school administrations quickly implemented entry controls in the name of safety. Entrance checkpoints were set up and more surveillance cameras were installed. Such measures made it practically impossible for unaffiliated outsiders to enter the school. Students needed to present or swipe their ID cards when entering or leaving the campus, which made it possible to record digital footprints on a massive scale. Students in black attire complained that they were selected for more thorough checks of their personal possessions. Some

schools deliberately placed tall and strong security guards at the checkpoints, apparently for the purpose of intimidation. As such, students felt that their school was increasingly becoming a 'jail.'

The coronavirus outbreak justified these restrictions in the name of disease prevention. From the spring semester of 2020 onwards, remote teaching reduced the on-campus student population. Students were also encouraged to leave their dormitories and return home to avoid contagion. As expected, school administrators banned protest gatherings on that pretext. Therefore, it became more difficult to rally movement supporters on campus.

Previously, student freedom of expression was tolerated; however, increasingly, students' protest banners, statues, posters, and graffiti were immediately removed by the administration. In the summer of 2020, the Lennon Wall in HKU was twice destroyed by mobsters, while security guards did nothing to prevent the vandalism. It remained a mystery how armed outsiders could roam freely at the supposedly tightly controlled campus. In July, police raided the PolyU student union office in a hunt for criminal evidence and confiscated computers. On November 19, around a hundred CU students launched a demonstration and reenacted the battle scene from the previous year with black attire, facemasks, goggles, and balloons. However, such a peaceful rally was not tolerated. A dozen security guards followed closely and filmed the whole event. The school administration subsequently issued two statements condemning this 'illegal' assembly and called the police. The next day, police and national security agents entered CU for a high-profile investigation. Evidently, the authorities aimed to make the campus a space that was no longer free and safe for student protesters.

Students' self-governing bodies bore the brunt of reprisals from the school leaders, who have discontinued the service of collecting on behalf of the student unions and imposed stringent conditions for using the school facilities or hosting events. The cases of HKU and CU indicate how repression works in the higher education. HKU student union adopted a resolution to honor a person who assaulted a policeman on July 1, 2021. Although student leaders later retracted the motion and resigned in apology, the government seized the opportunity to launch a relentless suppression campaign. HKU decided to derecognize the student union and ban involved students from entering the campus. The government arrested four students under the charge of 'advocating terrorism.' CU authority also required its student union to be registered as an independent entity and bear all the legal responsibilities. In frustration, CU student leaders announced its dissolution in October 2021, ending its fifty years of student activism.

The respected status of higher education is an important symbolic resource for student protests and consequently, the authorities also attempted to redefine its meanings. Sympathetic professors and school leaders were often the allies of student activists. After the 2014 Umbrella Movement, some universities did not renew contracts for outspoken academics. After the two university battles, the regime intensified their campaigns to cleanse higher education. In July, Benny Tai, an HKU legal professor and a pro-democracy movement leader, and Shiu Ka-chun, a BU lecturer in social welfare and a pro-democracy lawmaker, were sacked from their posts. In October, two mainland Chinese academics were appointed as HKU vice chancellors, and one of them appeared to be a member of the communist party. There was a mounting fear that Hong Kong's higher education institutions were rapidly losing their prestige and becoming mainland schools that slavishly toed the party line.

The authorities forced university leaders to demonstrate their political loyalty. In May, a conservative Hong Kong Coalition was established under the leadership of two former Chief Executives. The organization claimed to strive for stability and prosperity amid the coronavirus crisis. The cofounders comprised an impressive list of who's who among Hong Kong's leadership. Particularly noteworthy were the seven university presidents, including Rocky Tuan, who had been perceived as sympathizing with student protesters a few months earlier. Clearly, under the mounting pressure from Beijing, those school leaders who briefly strayed away from the official stance had returned to the fold. Here, the authorities reworked the role of university presidents as the intellectual and moral authority into a status quo supporter. By stripping away their independence, they actually redefined the meanings of higher education.

Students were also losing the protection afforded by their status. In September, the police announced that they would only recognize media agencies registered in the government record. Student journalists, disparaged as 'fake journalists' or 'black journalists', faced a greater risk on the street.

The respect for learning and universities had been a symbolic resource that students brought to their protest actions. However, there emerged some attempts to wipe out these cultural heritages. Leung Chung Yin, the former Chief Executive, led an online smear campaign against university presidents who appeared 'soft' on protesters. Leung called them 'pampering to students' or 'morally flexible' (*suk gwat* 縮骨). Some doxxing websites revealed the personal information of so-called 'yellow teachers.' Police associations accused Rocky Tuan of repeatedly harboring student criminals. In an open letter released in October 2020, police representatives contended that since Tuan had joined the Hong Kong Coalition and he should 'reflect on his previous mistakes, shoulder the responsibilities, and do something in

response.’ The letter ended ominously by demanding Tuan to respond and give a candid confession (Mingpao, 2020). Why did police officers dare to give a lecture to a university president? Such an *ad hominem* affront from ‘lowly’ police officers against an established intellectual leader suggested a reversal of social hierarchy, tolerated if not encouraged by the incumbents.

In short, if mobilization meant that protesters had gained control over resources, repression could not but be the opposite process of demobilization. The Hong Kong case indicates the authorities either restrict the access to resources or radically redefine the meanings of the resources.

### Discussion and conclusion

At the height of the PolyU battle, Chief Executive Carrie Lam claimed the university had become an ‘armory’ as well as a ‘military training field’ for radical protesters (Apple Daily, 2019). This article extended the armory metaphor for a fuller understanding of the student involvement in Hong Kong’s history-making movement since 2019. We maintain that students were able to launch such a disruptive and sustained protest because they adeptly mobilized their physical, spatial, interpersonal, and symbolic resources simultaneously. They staged protest rallies in their own campuses, fortified school structures to resist the police onslaught, secured support from their alumni, and obtained the endorsement of some university leaders. In order to activate these resources, student participants had to play different roles and adopt many scripts. They were at various times sorrowful mourners, brave street warriors, polished lobbyists, war correspondents, and ‘child pleaders’ to their school leaders.

In response, the authorities restricted access to these resources by sealing up campuses, outlawing on-site expressions and activities, dismissing dissident teachers, and installing loyalists in the upper echelon. The incumbents were apparently willing to defile the hallowed symbolism of higher education for political purposes. After the imposition of National Security Law in June 2020, Hong Kong’s streets and universities have been placed under quasi-martial rule, which made large-scale protests costly and nearly impossible. With prominent participants put behind the bar or fleeing abroad, a chapter of Hong Kong’s anti-extradition protest has been closed, although the movement momentum continued abroad.

Our investigation enlarged the resource definition by early proponents of mobilizational perspective. In addition to physical resources, we also examined spatial, symbolic, and interpersonal ones. As the National Security Law imposed a rather hostile environment for protest activism, it provided a rare lens to understand how available resources contracted during regime repression. Clearly, with reinforced policing in the campus, physical and spatial resources swiftly vanished. Symbolic resources were less

institutionalized and thus appeared less directly vulnerable to regime's demobilization. Nevertheless, Hong Kong government's decision to implement the so-called 'national security education' throughout the city's universities indicated that symbolic resources could be radically redefined to render them completely useless for dissident activities. A global higher education monitor reported the rapid downgrading of 'academic freedom score' in Hong Kong's universities, now trailing behind those in Cambodia and Russia (Radio Free Asia, 2021). Clearly, if the authorities were determined, the contemporary pursuit of academic excellence and the classical symbol of moral conscience can also be sacrificed in order to forge subservient higher education institutions. Finally, interpersonal resources were least likely to be destroyed by repression alone, precisely because they were embedded in everyday interaction (students, teachers, and alumni) and fortified by shared identities. These interpersonal resources were nourished by shared experiences, daily encounters, and collective memories proved more resilient over the long haul. The observation here dovetails with the ongoing campaigning among Hong Kong's diaspora communities, which was largely empowered by their common identity.

The mobilizational perspective pays special attention to the control over resources, because it adopts a realistic understanding: social movements and their opponents are assumed to be engaged in a war in which the best-equipped combatant is more likely to triumph. The early proponents of mobilizational perspective acknowledge this understanding is at best 'a partial theory' because it does not analyze the broader social change (Zald & McCarthy, 1994). Our article chose a close-up analysis of the student protesters' actions with the understanding that many important research questions have been left unanswered. Questions regarding the radicalization of Hong Kong's students and how they took on such an oppositional identity are in particular important and need to be addressed to.

For the students of contentious politics and sociology of education, there are two takeaways. First, universities are resource-rich institutions that have firmly established their footing in a modern and complex society. Intellectual freedom, liberal orientation, and youthful populations make them persistent sites of protest activism. The Hong Kong case represents an extreme case where social contestation has approached the intensity of a civil war. Protesters speak freely about 'revolution', whereas the incumbents act as if they are confronting an armed insurrection. In such a life-and-death struggle, university resources are exhaustively mobilized, and at the same time, the regime's attempts to restore order risk wreaking irreparable damage. Hong Kong's world-class universities unfortunately have become collateral damage in the relentless crossfire.

The role of universities is also culturally defined and influenced by inherited traditions. Confucianism bestows an elevated status on learning and intellectuals, and student protests are easily seen as the expression of a nation's moral conscience. With the school seen as a big family, such familial and paternalist understandings can be strategically appropriated. The mobilizational perspective was previously criticized for its insufficient attention to ideational elements. Hong Kong's case shows that a more culturally sensitive approach can improve our understanding of movement dynamics. It remains a fascinating research issue to analyze how cultural expectations continue to affect students' mobilizing strategies, both in Hong Kong and elsewhere in the world.

In the wake of Hong Kong's 2019–2020 anti-extradition protest, there emerged a #MilkTeaAlliance campaign, which included pro-democracy protest in Thailand and anti-coup protest in Myanmar (Dedman & Lai, 2021). These three movements not only shared the same goal of resisting China's authoritarian reach, but also witnessed the prominent role of youthful participants. Can our survey of Hong Kong's student activism offer some clues to make sense of what had happened in Thailand and Myanmar? First, university students play a practically important role in the pro-democracy movement, even though they are not in the leading position. With sufficient attention paid to their special status, researchers can move beyond the rather nebulous notion of a 'youth protest.' Secondly, compared to their same cohort not in school, university students are able to access a plethora of resources so that they can launch more innovative and disruptive challenges to the authorities. Lastly, if the regime is determined to restore the order at all cost, it is not enough to pacify the streets with deadly force and mass arrests. A thorough clampdown on higher education institutions is likely to be a follow-up measure once the protest movement has lost its momentum.

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