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14. ABSTRACT
The longevity of the 2019-2020 Hong Kong protests and its adherence to a defined Five Demands end-state presents a social movement worthy of examination. Using political opportunity theory as a framework and the 2014 Umbrella Movement as a backdrop, this paper argues that new opportunity structures are present in 2019-2020 that were not realized by the 2014 protestors. Protestor innovations within the social media domain have exposed new opportunity structures, enabling the protestors to exploit "flash mob" protests, a leaderless organizational structure, and narrative ownership to challenge the Hong Kong government and mainland China. The adoption of these new tactics provides a means for enhancing protest longevity and resiliency despite the well-documented human rights violations by the Hong Kong government. The advancement of protestor tactics between 2014 and today signals an evolution for modern social movements and brokers a new-age of guerrilla protests. Other movements, whether admirable or reprehensible, can adopt these tactics to force a political or social agenda – equally challenging authoritarian and democratic ideologies. This new reality of social movements compels increased awareness of these new opportunity structures to identify means for enabling progressive movements while thwarting nefarious ones.

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Political Opportunity Theory, Political Process Theory, Social Movement Theory, Social Movement, 2019 Hong Kong Protests, 2019-2020 Hong Kong Protests, Hong Kong, Social Media, Protest, Demonstration, 2014 Umbrella Movement, Guerrilla Protest

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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

**THE RISE OF THE GUERRILLA PROTEST MOVEMENT: EXPLORING NEW
OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURES EXPLOITED DURING THE 2019-2020 HONG KONG
PROTESTS**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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AY 2019-20

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Title:** The Rise of the Guerrilla Protest Movement: Exploring New Opportunity Structures Exploited During the 2019-2020 Hong Kong Protests
- Author:** Richard W. Hanberg, Maj, USAF
- Thesis:** The 2019-2020 Hong Kong protestors have brokered a new age for modern social movements. The innovation of the social media information domain by the protestors exposed new opportunity structures not realized during the 2014 Umbrella Movement, enabling the movement to endure despite escalating human rights violations. These new opportunity structures led Hong Kong protestors to a guerrilla-type social movement that exploits “flash mob” protests, a leaderless organizational structure, and narrative ownership to challenge the Hong Kong government to address protestor grievances.
- Discussion:** The longevity of the 2019-2020 protests despite increasing adversity presents a case study worthy of further exploration. The analysis presented leverages political opportunity theory as a framework for assessing the 2019-2020 Hong Kong Protests and contrasts it against the relatively short 2014 Umbrella Movement. A comparison of these protests requires an understanding of primary influencers behind social movements: collective grievances, mobilization resources, and opportunity structures. Using the 2014 Umbrella Movement as a backdrop, this paper argues that the collective grievances and mobilization resources (social media and information technology) are relatively similar, furthering the argument that new opportunity structures are present in 2019-2020 that were not realized by the 2014 protestors. Although social media platforms remain mostly unchanged since the 2014 Umbrella Movement, what has shifted is the protestors’ ability to exploit the social media environment to its maximum potential – exposing new vulnerabilities within the polity. The exposure of these new opportunity structures has permitted the 2019-2020 protests to endure as it enters its second year. Also intriguing is the protestors' collective adherence to a defined end-state as captured in its Five Demands – presenting another opportunity that has contributed to the movement's longevity.
- Conclusion:** The evolution between the 2014 Umbrella Movement and the 2019-2020 Hong Kong Protests demonstrates that guerrilla "flash mob" protests, a leaderless organizational structure, and narrative ownership are viable methods for ensuring movement survival. The advancement of protestor tactics between 2014 and today signals an evolution for modern social movements and brokers a new-age of guerrilla protests. Other movements, whether admirable or reprehensible, can adopt these tactics to force a political or social agenda – equally challenging authoritarian and democratic ideologies. This new reality of social movements compels increased awareness of these new opportunity structures to identify means for enabling progressive movements while thwarting nefarious ones.

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The subject selected for this thesis was of interest because of its contemporary nature and the complexities surrounding Hong Kong's 20 plus years of protests. The size, scale, and longevity of the 2019-2020 Hong Kong Protests are impressive. I found myself wondering why are the current protests were enduring when earlier protest efforts collapsed when challenged by the Hong Kong government. This question drove me to explore opportunity structures that may be enabling the protests to continue where the 2014 Umbrella Movement failed. The 2019-2020 protestors have innovated the social media information domain, exposed new protest opportunity structures, and are ushering in a new age of guerrilla protest repertoire.

The onset of the coronavirus (COVID-19) in early 2020 brought new challenges to the protestors. The effects of COVID-19 hamstrung protestor movements, though it presented new grievances against the government. As of early-April 2020, the protests are ongoing despite being severely inhibited by COVID-19 and the implementation of social distancing measures by the Hong Kong government. As the movement celebrates its first anniversary, it competes to maintain its voice against headlines dominated by COVID-19. Determining the longevity and future state of the 2019-2020 Hong Kong Protests will have to wait until the resolution of the COVID-19 pandemic.

I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to my advisor, Dr. Claire Metelits, for her mentoring throughout the entire process. Without your guidance, I would have stumbled blindly through the world of political science and social mobilization. A final thanks to the United States Marine Corps Command and Staff College, the Gray Scholars Advanced Academic Program, and my fellow students, I am humbled and grateful to have participated in this program alongside you.

Introduction

The longevity of the 2019-2020 Hong Kong Protests and its adherence to a defined Five Demands end-state presents a social movement worthy of examination. The mass demonstrations that started on March 15, 2019, have placed Hong Kong in a civil-political crisis as protestors challenge their government and the influence of mainland China.¹ After a few short months, what started as a response to a controversial extradition bill had expanded to become a pro-democracy, suffrage, and anti-police brutality movement.² The protests catalyzed collective action fearing the deterioration of Hong Kong's legal system and an overextension of power by mainland China. Despite Hong Kong's withdrawal of the extradition bill on October 23, 2019, tensions continued to escalate, leading to increased violence.^{3 4} The protests are ongoing as of April 2020, although inhibited by the onset of coronavirus (COVID-19) earlier in the year. Large-scale social movements like the 2019-2020 Hong Kong Protests are not a unique occurrence for the inhabitants on the island. Since Britain transferred Hong Kong to China in 1997, Hong Kong has experienced numerous social movements protesting China's subversion of its promised "One Country, Two Systems" approach to governance in Hong Kong. The most recent significant protest, the 2014 Umbrella Movement, lasted four short months and failed to resolve the grievances of the protestors.⁵

¹ Richard Hanberg, "Political Opportunity Theory and the 2019 Hong Kong Protests," (unpublished manuscript, November 17, 2019), Microsoft Word file.

² Tara John, "Why Hong Kong is Protesting: Their Fierce Demands Listed," (*CNN.com*, August 30, 2019), <https://www.cnn.com/2019/08/13/asia/hong-kong-airport-protest-explained-hnk-intl/index.html>.

³ Hanberg.

⁴ Jessie Pang and Twinnie Siu, "Hong Kong Extradition Bill Official Killed, but More Unrest Likely," (*Reuters*, October 23, 2019), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-hongkong-protests/hong-kong-extradition-bill-officially-killed-but-move-unlikely-to-end-unrest-idUSKBN1X200F/>.

⁵ Adolfo Arranz and Jeffie Lam, "Hong Kong: From Occupy 2014 to Protests 2019," *South China Morning Post*, September 28, 2019, <https://multimedia.scmp.com/infographics/news/hong-kong/article/3030696/from-occupy-to-hong-kong-protests/index.html>.

Where the 2014 protests ended abruptly, the 2019-2020 protests continue into their second year. Although COVID-19 presented new barriers that limited public demonstrations, the perceived failure of the Hong Kong government to take appropriate action to prevent the spread of COVID-19 have incited additional protestor grievances. Why have the 2019-2020 protests endured while the 2014 protests failed? The core grievances of both movements are fundamentally the same – advocacy for democracy and representation. Today's protestors also leverage the same information technology used during the Umbrella Movement to coordinate its mobilization activities. Despite grievance commonality and access to similar mobilization resources, the Hong Kong government has been unable to force an end to the protests. Political opportunity theory argues that the endurance of the 2019-2020 protests are due to opportunity structures that did not exist in 2014. Fundamentally, the 2019-2020 protestors have transformed the social media information domain to expose new opportunity structures. The 2019-2020 Hong Kong protestors have brokered a new age for modern social movements. The innovation of the social media information domain by the protestors exposed new opportunity structures not realized during the 2014 Umbrella Movement, enabling the movement to endure despite escalating human rights violations. These new opportunity structures led Hong Kong protestors to a guerrilla-type social movement that exploits “flash mob” protests, a leaderless organizational structure, and narrative ownership to challenge the Hong Kong government to address protestor grievances.

Contemporary Social Movement Theory

This paper leverages political opportunity theory as a means for analyzing the 2019-2020 Hong Kong Protests while contrasting it against the failed 2014 Umbrella Movement. The 2014 protests serve as a comparative model due to the overlapping grievances and mobilization

resources between the two movements, requiring exploration of other enabling factors – opportunity structures. Political opportunity theory provides a context for assessing the drivers of collective action and its escalation toward social movements, encompassing three social components.⁶ First, an insurgent consciousness, also called a collective grievance, must exist such that a collective sense of injustice, or grievance, motivates action.⁷ This insurgent consciousness must also progress toward a unified end-state to coalesce collective grievances into action. As the sense of injustices escalates toward a tipping point, the long-term costs of inaction become more costly than the short-term costs of action.⁸ Second, a social movement must mobilize the resources required to organize and sustain its movement.⁹ Third, a political opportunity must exist such that a vulnerability or receptivity is present within the challenged system.¹⁰ Organizational receptivity refers to the openness of an organization to the resolution of a social movement's grievances (e.g., an opening in the political system).¹¹ A vulnerability is a weakness in the political system that a social movement can exploit to further its objectives.¹² The foundational concept of political opportunity theory is that the existence of opportunities or vulnerabilities primarily drives social movements.

Sidney Tarrow introduced political opportunity theory in his 1994 book *Power in Movement*.¹³ Tarrow argues that regardless of grievances or mobilization resources, the power of social movements results from the opportunity structures that are present. As political

⁶ Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements, Collective Action, and Politics*, 2nd Edition, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 71.

⁷ Ryan Cragun, et al, *Introduction to Sociology*, (Blackslet River, March 2006), https://books.google.com/books?id=rJFHTucmPTMC&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false.Cragun, 234.

⁸ Tarrow, 71.

⁹ Cragun, 234.

¹⁰ Cragun, 234.

¹¹ Tarrow, 71.

¹² Cragun, 234.

¹³ Steven M. Buechler, *Understanding Social Movements: Theories from the Classical Era to the Present* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), 136-138

opportunities increase, challengers to those in power will seek to advance their claims to resolve the collective grievances.¹⁴ There are five opportunity structure categories: increased access, altered elite alignments, ally partnering, elite divisions, and repressive capacity of the state.¹⁵ ¹⁶ The final category, repressive capacity, is a measure of a state's inability to repress an aspect of a social movement – effectively an exploitable vulnerability.¹⁷ Tarrow's political opportunity theory was selected for this analysis as it identifies opportunity structures as the primary driver for social movements – helping to contrast the ongoing success of the 2019-2020 protests against the failed backdrop of the 2014 Umbrella Movement.

The application of political opportunity theory provides insight into the catalysts for social movements and an understanding of why they gain and maintain momentum.¹⁸ Analysis of the 2014 Umbrella Movement and the 2019-2020 Hong Kong Protests demonstrates that both movements possessed comparatively similar grievances and access to resources. Political opportunity theory highlights that the 2019-2020 Hong Kong protestors exposed new opportunities not fully realized during the 2014 Umbrella Movement. This paper argues that the lessons learned from the 2014 protests led to today's weaponization of the social media information domain – creating radically new social movement opportunity structures that did not exist during the failed 2014 Umbrella Movement.

Historical Context

The 2019-2020 Hong Kong Protest Movement is the culmination of a history of grievances compounded by the different social ideologies of Hong Kong and mainland China.

¹⁴ Tarrow, 71.

¹⁵ Buechler.137.

¹⁶ David A. Snow and Sarah Anne Soule, *A Primer on Social Movements*, (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2010), 75-76.

¹⁷ Snow, 75-76.

¹⁸ Hanberg.

Great Britain established Hong Kong as a colony in 1841.¹⁹ Great Britain leased the island and surrounding area after a series of expansion efforts in the late 1890s.²⁰ As part of the lease agreement with China, this area would transfer back to China in 1997.²¹ Over the next hundred years, China and Hong Kong diverged economically, politically, and socially. China pursued a communistic ideology while Hong Kong, comparatively, accepted liberal Western ideologies during the remaining years of British rule.

Hong Kong as a Colony of Great Britain

Beginning in the early 19th century, British merchants recognized the island of Hong Kong as a critical economic node connecting Far East Asia to Europe. Its deep and sheltered harbor was of commercial and strategic importance to Britain as it expanded its trade routes.²² After the First Opium War between China and Great Britain (1839-1842), China ceded the island as a colony to Great Britain. Twenty years later, the Second Opium War (1856-1860) resulted in Great Britain expanding its control around the island to include the Kowloon peninsula to the north. The subsequent Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895) between China and Japan weakened the former, leaving it vulnerable to increased colonization pressure from Europe. As a result, Great Britain also expanded its influence to 235 islands, deemed the New Territories, as part of a 99-year lease of the land effective July 1, 1898.²³ These events later shaped China's perspective of the illegitimacy of a separate Hong Kong as a byproduct of unjust agreements taken by force.

The next century challenged British rule over Hong Kong through two World Wars and the subsequent rise of Chinese nationalism. The formation of the People's Republic of China (PRC) under Mao Zedong on October 1, 1949, further complicated matters by cementing

¹⁹ Chi-Keung Leung, "Hong Kong," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, (Encyclopedia Britannica, inc.: January 29, 2020, Accessed March 6, 2020), <https://www.britannica.com/place/Hong-Kong/Cultural-life#ref11639>.

²⁰ Leung.

²¹ Leung.

²² Leung.

²³ Leung.

China's adoption of communistic ideologies.²⁴ By the 1970s, China's government advocated that the lease set to expire in 1997, specific to the New Territories, included the island of Hong Kong, the Kowloon peninsula, as well as the surrounding New Territories (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Map of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region²⁵

Increased wariness regarding the upcoming transfer eventually led Great Britain to relent to China's insistence that Great Britain returns the territories it had obtained. The 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration outlined the details regarding the 1997 territorial transfer while addressing the disparate governance and social structures between China and Hong Kong through Hong Kong's Basic Law. The Basic Law organized Hong Kong as a Special Administrative Region (SAR) under the Chinese government and implemented a 50-year "One

²⁴ Leung.

²⁵ Alamy Limited, (Alamy, accessed March 20, 2020), <https://www.alamy.com/>.

Country, Two Systems" policy. This policy permitted Hong Kong citizens to maintain a degree of political autonomy and its capitalist economy, despite its prohibition in mainland China. It also allowed Hong Kong to retain its political freedoms, including freedom of speech and the press.²⁶ As part of the transitional policy, China agreed that the rights would remain in place for 50-years.^{27 28}

The 1984 Chinese-British Joint Declaration signaled the beginning of Hong Kong's transition to Chinese rule, and the next decade saw a series of democratic reforms as its transition to Communist China loomed on the horizon.²⁹ Beijing's repression of the 1989 student protests in Tiananmen Square increased the apprehension of Hong Kong's citizens as they accelerated their efforts, with British support, toward full democratization before the transfer.^{30 31} Most notably, Hong Kong's last British Governor implemented full universal suffrage representation for electing the territory's 1995 Legislative Council.^{32 33} Despite this election aligning to Article 68 of Hong Kong Basic Law, mainland China worked to undermine Hong Kong's attempts at establishing a governance system that conflicted with the aims of the PRC.³⁴

Responding to Hong Kong's controversial 1995 elections, China's 150-member Preparatory Committee, organized to oversee the transition, "voted to dissolve the elected

²⁶ Melvin Barnes, "Hong Kong in Protest," *Origins, Current Events in Historical Perspective*, Vol. 12, Issue 12, (History Departments, The Ohio State University and Miami University: September 2019), <http://origins.osu.edu/article/hong-kong-protest-china-extradition-umbrella>.

²⁷ Leung.

²⁸ Eva Liu and Yue S.Y., "Political Development in Hong Kong since the 1980s," Research and Library Services Division, (Legislative Council Secretariat, Hong Kong: September 1996), <https://www.legco.gov.hk/yr97-98/english/sec/library/956rp17.pdf>.

²⁹ Liu.

³⁰ Larry Diamond and Ramon Hawley Myers, *Elections and Democracy in Greater China*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 80.

³¹ Diamond, 46.

³² Stephen Sherlock, "Hong Kong and the Transfer to China: Issues and Prospects," *Current Issues Brief 33 1996-97*, (Department of the Parliamentary Library, Canberra Australia: June 23, 1997, accessed April 15, 2020), https://www.aph.gov.au/sitecore/content/Home/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/Publications_Archive/CIB/CIB9697/97cib33.

³³ Liu.

³⁴ "Fact Check: Was Hong Kong Ever Promised Democracy?" *RMIT ABC News Australia*, (Fact Check, December 16, 2014), <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-12-16/was-hong-kong-ever-promised-democracy-fact-check/5809964>.

legislature and instill a provisional legislature after Hong Kong returned to Chinese sovereignty."³⁵ The Preparation Committee also instilled a Chinese-backed Chief Executive (the highest governmental position in Hong Kong) to lead the Legislative Council.³⁶ The Chinese-backed Legislative Council shortly announced plans to restrict opposing political groups, limit public protests, and instill "traditional Chinese values."³⁷ Mainland China effectively appointed Hong Kong's first government under a "one country, two systems" framework. As China and Hong Kong celebrated the July 1, 1997 handover, China undermined the political autonomy initially promised as part of the transition strategy.

Hong Kong as a Special Administrative Region to China

From 1997 onward, Hong Kong struggled to regain the democratic principles and cultural freedoms established before the transfer. While under the rule of Great Britain, Hong Kong diverged from mainland China, integrating Western concepts as part of its culture, law, and governance. Captured in its Basic Law, Hong Kong adopted traditionally Western views toward freedom of the press, speech, and religion. This divergence in political and self-governance perspectives directly conflicted with the autocratic ideology of China. Despite the existence of Hong Kong's Basic Law, differences in interpretation and transition remain between the Chinese government and Hong Kong's citizens.³⁸ The subsequent years under Chinese rule resulted in the degradation of the democratic and social ideologies that Hong Kong's citizens believed were protected as part of its Basic Law. Aiming to recapture these rights, Hong Kongers mobilized numerous protests movements over the next 20 years.^{39 40}

³⁵ Steven Levine, "Hong Kong's Return to China," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, (Encyclopedia Britannica, inc.: October 8, 1998, Accessed March 6, 2020). <https://www.britannica.com/topic/reversion-to-Chinese-sovereignty-1020544>.

³⁶ Levine.

³⁷ Levine.

³⁸ Barnes.

³⁹ Leung.

Despite the pro-democracy movements after the 1997 British transfer, Beijing continued to exert influence over Hong Kong's appointed leaders to undermine advancements towards democracy. In the early 2000s, numerous initiatives began to erode Hong Kong's political freedoms. Pressured by China, Hong Kong's Chief Executive introduced anti-sedition bills that effectively banned organizations prohibited in mainland China.⁴¹ Starting in 2002, the first of these bills targeted religious organizations banned in mainland-China and expanded to target political opposition groups.⁴² Over the next decade, Hong Kong's government continued to sidestep earlier commitments toward universal suffrage. As each election grew nearer, Beijing asserted its control and altered the election process to favor its pro-Chinese objectives. Conversely, China views its efforts as an incremental transition strategy to align Hong Kong under Chinese rule by 2047.

Competition to maintain democratic ideals reached a turning point during Hong Kong's 2014 election of the Chief Executive of the Legislative Council. Despite promises to support a direct election, China subverted the process by reserving the right to approve the list of candidates.⁴³ This move by China triggered a series of large-scale pro-democracy protests starting on September 1, 2014, known as the Umbrella Movement.⁴⁴ Hong Kong's history of protests demonstrates the long-standing grievances its citizens hold against their government and the influence of mainland China. The 2019-2020 Hong Kong Protests echo similar grievances. Understanding the grievances and social structures behind the recent protests requires an understanding of Hong Kong's political and sociological history.

⁴⁰ Anastasia Yip, "Hong Kong and China: One Country, Two Systems, Two Identities," (Global Societies Journal. Volume 3. 2015), http://gsj.global.ucsb.edu/sites/secure.lsit.ucsb.edu.gisp.d7_gs-2/files/sitefiles/Yip.pdf.

⁴¹ Barnes.

⁴² Barnes.

⁴³ Barnes.

⁴⁴ Amy Gunia, "A Brief History of Protest in Post-Handover Hong Kong." *Time*, (Updated June 20, 2019), <https://time.com/5606212/hong-kong-history-mass-demonstrations-protest/>.

Assessing the 2014 Umbrella Movement

The globally adopted name for the 2014 pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong is the "Umbrella Revolution/Movement," referencing the umbrellas the protestors used to protect against the pepper spray used by the Hong Kong police.⁴⁵ The movement was in response to an August 2014 announcement by the NPCSC that candidates running for Hong Kong governmental positions required pre-approval from Beijing.⁴⁶ This decision undermined Hong Kong's attempts toward democracy – cementing long-standing grievances dating back to the 1997 handover. During the 79-day protest, organizers leveraged web-based technology and social media to resource and coordinate demonstrations.⁴⁷ The social media information domain served as a new public sphere where protestors organized, communicated with global audiences, shared images of the movement, and voiced support. Key leaders emerged representing the larger collective body of the protestors to coordinate demonstrations, advocate grievances, and align protest group actions. Pro-democracy advocates employed a campaign of civil disobedience to demonstrate outside government buildings and occupy principal thoroughfares around Hong Kong. The 2014 Umbrella Movement abruptly ended on December 15, 2014, after its organizers, fearing for the safety of the protestors, persuaded the participants to disperse.⁴⁸ The protestors, aiming for a democratic Hong Kong, failed to resolve its grievances with the governing body and, ultimately, China.

⁴⁵ Amaelle Guiton, "Hong Kong: #umbrellarevolution, Anatomy of a Hashtag," *Slate*, (Updated September 30, 2014), <http://www.slate.fr/story/92747/hong-kong-umbrellarevolution-hashtag>.

⁴⁶ Fact Check, ABC News Australia.

⁴⁷ Victoria Tin-bor Hui, "Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement: The Protest and Beyond," (*Journal of Democracy*, Volume 26, Number 2, Johns Hopkins University Press: April 2015).

⁴⁸ Hui.

Collective Grievances

The 2014 Umbrella Movement stemmed from a series of grievances against China regarding its delayed implementation of universal suffrage in Hong Kong.⁴⁹ Articles 45 and 68 of Hong Kong's Basic Law stipulates that the "ultimate aim is ... universal suffrage" when electing the Chief Executive and Legislative Council.⁵⁰ Since 1997, China has used ambiguities and interpretations of Basic Law to delay direct elections. Notably, in 2007 China's National People's Congress Standing Committee (NPCSC), China's legislative body, ruled out direct election for the 2012 elections and suggested that the 2017 elections may implement universal suffrage in the future.⁵¹ The inclusion of "may," in its official statement, led Hong Kong's pro-democracy advocates to believe that China was not committed to meeting the intent outlined in Basic Law. On August 31, 2014, the NPCSC released a statement permitting the public to elect Hong Kong's Chief Executive in 2017.⁵² However, China effectively retained final approval of the candidates eligible for election via a vetting process through an appointed Nomination Committee.⁵³ This ruling by the NPCSC was a tipping point triggering the 2014 protest, symbolizing 20-years of China undermining Hong Kong's advances toward democracy and universal suffrage.

Social Media and Mobilization

The effects of the "one country, two system" policy, coupled with the ratified Hong Kong Bill of Rights, permitted Hong Kong to adopt an independent free internet. While the PRC aggressively implemented its Great Fire Wall (GFW) in China, it did not extend to Hong Kong.

⁴⁹ Gunia.

⁵⁰ Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government, "The Basic Law of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China," (Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Bureau, April 2017, Accessed March 20, 2020), https://www.basiclaw.gov.hk/en/basiclawtext/images/basiclaw_full_text_en.pdf.

⁵¹ Fact Check, ABC News Australia.

⁵² Fact Check, ABC News Australia.

⁵³ Fact Check, ABC News Australia.

Free of control from Beijing, Hong Kong's internet developed with little government oversight. The laws prescribed in Basic Law provided for freedom of press and speech – resulting in little internet censorship beyond criminalized offenses (e.g., computer crime and pornography).

The 2014 Umbrella Movement marked the first major Hong Kong protest that leveraged social media to coordinate its mobilization activities, though with only limited effects.⁵⁴ In defining social media mobilization, this paper leverages Colin Agur's interpretation that "participants of members of the movement used social media to motivate activists and would-be activists to add their physical and digital efforts to the protest."⁵⁵ By 2014, Facebook and WhatsApp were popular internet-based social media platforms used in Hong Kong to either share news or communicate within closed circles.⁵⁶ These two applications were vital communication resources that permitted mobilization across a diverse audience during the initial stages of the 2014 protests.⁵⁷ Social media and mobile chat applications supported the initial movement efforts, but "did not have this catalytic effect at the moment when the movement moved from a fringe event to a mass event."⁵⁸ At its core, social media served as an alternative resource augmenting traditional means of mobilization and communication. Although social media and mobile chat applications provided a new mobilization resource, the 2014 Umbrella Movement continued to employ traditional protests strategies and organizational structures that ultimately led to the protests ending abruptly.

⁵⁴ Paul S. N. Lee, Clement Y. K. So, and Louis Leung, "Social Media and Umbrella Movement: Insurgent Public Sphere in Formation," *Chinese Journal of Communication* 8, no. 4 (February 2015): 356-375, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17544750.2015.1088874>.

⁵⁵ Colin Agur and Nicholas Frisch, "Digital Disobedience and the Limits of Persuasion: Social Media Activism in Hong Kong's 2014 Umbrella Movement," *Social Media Society* 5, no. 1 (2019), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/330971075_Digital_Disobedience_Social_Media_Activism_in_Hong_Kong's_2014_Umbrella_Movement.

⁵⁶ Agur.

⁵⁷ Agur.

⁵⁸ Agur.

The Consequences of Centralized Leadership

Assessing the 2014 Umbrella movement yields conflicting opinions regarding the impact of key leaders within the movement. Some claim it was a "leaderless movement." This paper argues that the Umbrella Movement was not a "leaderless movement," but that the protestors collectively accepted the leadership provided by a small group of individuals. These collectively identified leaders would ultimately contribute to the movement's abrupt end. Throughout the movement, seven prominent figures organized and led the civil disobedience campaigns.⁵⁹ Occupy Central with Love and Peace (OCLP) was a pro-democracy civil-disobedience campaign organized by Reverend Chu Yiu-ming, Benny Tai, and Dr. Chan Kin-man in 2013. The three OCLP leaders organized OCLP participation at the onset of the protests. A large student youth-group dominated the Umbrella Movement.⁶⁰ Four prominent figures emerged representing the student body: Joshua Wong Chi-Fung, Nathan Law Kwun-Chung, Alex Chow Yong-kang, and Lester Shum.⁶¹ These figures were vital in organizing groups and sub-groups of demonstrators as well as representing the movement during negotiations with the Hong Kong government.⁶²

Leading the 2014 Umbrella Movement placed a burden of responsibility upon the OCLP figureheads that resulted in them effectively ending the protests. Amidst increasing violence between the Hong Kong police, protestors, and counter-protest groups, the OCLP-trio turned themselves in to the police and directed the protestors to disband.⁶³ Their statement to the protestors was, "our call to retreat now is out of love for the occupiers. At this moment, we

⁵⁹ Arranz.

⁶⁰ Agur.

⁶¹ Arranz.

⁶² Agur.

⁶³ Jonathan Kaiman, "Occupy Central Leaders Say They Will Surrender to Hong Kong Police," *The Guardian*, (Guardian News and Media, December 2, 2014), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/dec/02/occupy-central-hong-kong-surrender-police-prodemocracy>.

should all protect ourselves and leave this very dangerous place."⁶⁴ Despite opposition from the student leaders, the occupiers disbanded, and by December 15, the protests had ended. The challenge of a movement led by a small group of individuals is that the movement's success depends on its leaders to ensure that it endures during times of adversity. This dependency is also a liability. Complications like increasing violence place the leaders in a moral dilemma, balancing grievance resolution with the safety of the protestors. In the case of the 2014 Umbrella Movement, the OCLP leadership provided a means for rapid mobilization, but also presented an emotional vulnerability to the leaders that led to the end of the movement.

The Outdated Strategy of Occupation

The protest method used by the 2014 Umbrella Movement protesters was that of occupation where demonstrators organized mass sit-ins in four major traffic thoroughfares. This strategy aimed to shutdown major traffic areas to demonstrate collective solidarity while raising awareness among other Hong Kongers. Through organized disruption and a persistent presence, the protestors aimed to garner enough public sentiment to drive political change. Movement leaders within the OCLP and student body coordinated demonstrations at five key city locations with the area outside Hong Kong's Central Government Offices in the Admiralty district denoted as the primary protest site. According to figures provided by the organizers, protestor numbers for a single day during the peak of the 79-day movement were approximately 500,000.⁶⁵ While Hong Kong police and protestors clashed at these fixed locations, the government pursued legal means to reinforce clearing efforts through civil injunctions. Despite efforts by the

⁶⁴ Kaiman.

⁶⁵ Han Huang, "History of Hong Kong Protests: Riots, Rallies and Brollies," South China Morning Post, July 4, 2019, <https://multimedia.scmp.com/infographics/news/hong-kong/article/3016815/hong-kong-protest-city/index.html>.

demonstrators, the singular strategy of using pre-determined fixed locations for protests exposed a vulnerability that the Hong Kong police and government were able to exploit.

By limiting protest sites to specific locations, the protestors provided the polity a means of shifting the confrontation from a competition between ideas to a battle for territorial control. The cognitive shift toward physical control of a specified location provided the Hong Kong government a target to focus its efforts, massing its police forces to the locations to secure the protest sites. The protestors' focused effort to control territory informally anchored them to a specific battleground that, when lost, equated to defeat. During the final days of the movement, the government had driven the demonstrators to a single occupation site, the Admiralty district. The counter-protest injunctions leveraged by the Hong Kong government provided a legal means to force the protestors out of the Admiralty district. The isolated protest location also permitted the Hong Kong police to concentrate its forces and demobilize the protestors. The 2014 Umbrella Movement started as a struggle of competing ideas but devolved into a competition for territorial control. Once the protestors lost the Admiralty district, the movement was over.

Protest Conclusion

The end of the 2014 Umbrella Movement came as quickly as it started. Looking back at the 2014 Umbrella Movement and assessing why it failed is challenging. Other social movement theory frameworks argue that there was not enough grievance momentum to sustain a long-duration protest. The grievances tied to the 2014 Umbrella Movement are long-standing and deeply rooted in Hong Kong's protest culture. Since 1997, Hong Kongers have participated in an annual July 1 protest rally advocating for pro-democracy and universal suffrage. These protests have failed and led to an escalation in violence and a further erosion of citizens' rights. Hong Kong's increasingly authoritarian government has the means to exploit legacy protest

organizational structures and tactics. Leaders are isolated and coerced into surrendering their cause through fear and manipulation. Localized demonstrations, regardless of scale, can be isolated, providing the government a means to concentrate its police force while pursuing legal means. Challenging an authoritarian state requires the exposure of new opportunity structures that close off movement vulnerabilities while exposing new openings against the polity. Although the 2014 Umbrella Movement failed, the protestors learned from their mistakes and returned in 2019, adopting new tactics to advance their claims.

Assessing the 2019-2020 Hong Kong Protests

Contemporary social movement theories center around three primary considerations for assessing protest movements. First, a grouping of aggrieved actors must share a substantive level of collective grievance to warrant collective complaint and corrective collective action.⁶⁶ In the case of the 2019-2020 Hong Kong Protests, this paper argues that the core grievances experienced by the protestors are long-standing since the 1997 handover between Great Britain and China. The continued degradation of democratic ideals and increased human rights abuses by the Hong Kong governments serves to reinforce protestor grievances. Second, the ability of a social movement to emerge and persist is dependent on the resources available.⁶⁷ In analyzing the 2019-2020 Hong Kong Protests, this paper examines the critical resource used to mobilize the protestors – social media. Although social media was present during the 2014 Umbrella Movement, it served as a secondary communication resource, whereas the 2019-2020 protestors have been dependent upon social media to direct collective action. Finally, political opportunities are the crux of this analysis, as collective action requires that an opportunity structure, or

⁶⁶ Snow, 24.

⁶⁷ Snow, 87-88.

vulnerability, be present such that a protest can exist and endure.⁶⁸ In comparing the 2014 Umbrella Movement to the 2019-2020 Hong Kong Protests, new opportunity structures are present that were not in 2014. The exploitation of these new opportunities provides a means for the 2019-2020 protests to endure well-beyond the 2014 movement.

Collective Grievances

Insurgent consciousness, or collective grievance, increases as members of a society experience an increase in a threat of deprivation toward their values or ideals.⁶⁹ As the grievances and costs of inaction increase, a tipping point emerges and drives a social movement to seek grievance resolution.⁷⁰ In the case of the 2019-2020 Hong Kong Protests, the grievance tipping point occurred in February 2019 when the government proposed a controversial amendment to Hong Kong's extradition laws.^{71 72} Submitted by Hong Kong's Security Bureau, the amendment bill permitted local authorities to detain and deport fugitives to Taiwan and mainland China.⁷³ Pro-democracy groups perceived the amendment as a means for China to undermine Hong Kong's legal system and overextension of the "chief executive's authority ... bypassing the legislature."^{74 75} The protestors were also apprehensive regarding the lack of transparency within China's judicial system.⁷⁶ The proposed amendment continued to move forward despite public outcry.⁷⁷ Pro-democracy groups responded by organizing a series of

⁶⁸ Snow, 66-67.

⁶⁹ David Meyer, "Protest and Political Opportunities," (*Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 30, August 11, 2004), 131.

⁷⁰ Hanberg.

⁷¹ Hanberg.

⁷² Karishma Singh, "Timeline: Key Dates in Hong Kong's Protests," (*Reuters*, October 1, 2019), <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-china-anniversary-timeline/timeline-key-dates-in-hong-kongs-protests-idUSKBN1WG3XK>.

⁷³ Holmes Chan, "'Trojan Horse': Hong Kong's China Extradition Plans May Harm City's Judicial Protections," (*Hong Kong Free Press*, February 13, 2019), <https://www.hongkongfp.com/2019/02/13/trojan-horse-hong-kongs-china-extradition-plans-may-harm-citys-judicial-protections-say-democrats/>.

⁷⁴ Hanberg.

⁷⁵ Chan.

⁷⁶ Hanberg.

⁷⁷ Hanberg.

demonstrations that started on March 31, 2019.^{78 79} Movement organizers estimated approximately 12,000 protestors participated, while the Hong Kong government portrayed a starkly different estimate of 5,000.⁸⁰ Over the next few months, protests intensified and led to escalating violence between the police force and the protestors.

As the 2019-2020 Hong Kong Protests progressed, they adopted what became known as the Five Demands that prescribed five non-negotiable end-state objectives necessary to resolve protestor grievances. The Five Demands were: withdrawal of the extradition bill, the government retract its classification of the protests as riots, the release of arrested protestors, an independent investigation into police brutality, and universal suffrage.⁸¹ Despite the withdrawal of the amendment on October 23, 2019, nearly eight months since its first proposal, protests continued as the protestors pursued a full resolution of the Five Demands. Although the extradition amendment served as a tipping point, it highlighted additional underlying grievances that trace back to the 2014 Umbrella Movement and subsequent anti-democratic initiatives enacted by the Hong Kong government.

By 2014, Hong Kong's electoral reforms had marginalized the elective authority of its citizens such that only half of the Legislative Council were directly elected, while the other half were appointed indirectly through functional constituencies.^{82 83} Further spurning pro-democracy advocates was the subsequent election of Hong Kong's Chief Executive by a heavily criticized and pro-Chinese Election Committee.^{84 85} Hong Kong's citizens responded through mass

⁷⁸ Hanberg.

⁷⁹ Singh.

⁸⁰ Singh.

⁸¹ Arranz.

⁸² Hanberg.

⁸³ Hong Kong Legislative Council, "Legco Today," (Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People Republic of China, accessed November 15, 2019), https://www.legco.gov.hk/general/english/intro/about_lc.htm.

⁸⁴ Hanberg.

protests, later known as the 2014 Umbrella Movement.⁸⁶ This movement ultimately failed to obtain concessions from the government.⁸⁷ Over the next four-year, mainland China continued to undermine the “autonomy” promised under Hong Kong’s Basic Law.⁸⁸ A notable subversion was the 2016 Chinese court ruling that disqualified and subsequently prevented six elected Hong Kong lawmakers from serving on the Legislative Council.⁸⁹ The assertion of Chinese courts over an inherently Hong Kong political issue further incited pro-democracy advocates.⁹⁰

The proposed 2019 amendment to the extradition policy challenged citizen sovereignty by undermining Hong Kong's due process laws.⁹¹ The "one country, two systems" model is scheduled to phase out in 2047 and will place Hong Kong under the complete authority of mainland China.⁹² Facing the deterioration of its independent governance, a looming 2047 transition date, and an expanding list of injustices, the cost of inaction became exceedingly high for Hong Kong’s citizens.⁹³ The proposed extradition amendment was the catalyst for collective grievance formation, resulting in social mobilization.⁹⁴ The citizens of Hong Kong responded by leveraging social media as a means to mobilize mass demonstrations, seeking to advance their claims against their government.⁹⁵

⁸⁵ Caroline Carter, “How Hong Kong Picks its Chief Executives,” (*The Economist*, March 21, 2017), <https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2017/03/21/how-hong-kong-picks-its-chief-executives>.

⁸⁶ Hanberg.

⁸⁷ Hanberg.

⁸⁸ Hanberg.

⁸⁹ Ellie Ng, “Explainer and Timeline: The Oath Fallout and Beijing’s Intervention in Hong Kong’s Mini-Constitution,” (*Hong Kong Free Press*, November 5, 2016), <https://www.hongkongfp.com/2016/11/05/explainer-timeline-the-oath-fallout-and-beijings-intervention-in-hong-kongs-mini-constitution/>.

⁹⁰ Hanberg.

⁹¹ Hanberg.

⁹² Hanberg.

⁹³ Hanberg.

⁹⁴ Hanberg.

⁹⁵ Hanberg.

Social Media and Mobilization

The second component of political opportunity theory asserts that resources for mobilization are necessary to support social movements.⁹⁶ Resource mobilization is a measure of a social movement's ability to amass and support their initiatives.⁹⁷ The ability to rapidly mobilize resources is as essential as access to those resources.⁹⁸ A vital resource available to the 2019-2020 movement is its robust and decentralized communication network, accessing a large protestor base while permitting rapid and coordinated participant mobilization.⁹⁹ The first organized protest of the movement occurred within days of the extradition amendment proposal and quickly expanded from tens-of-thousands to hundreds-of-thousands people.¹⁰⁰ ¹⁰¹ Over the next few months, protestor estimates surged to over a million people – nearly a quarter of the population of Hong Kong.¹⁰²

Despite the technological advances present in 2019-2020, the core mobilization resources are inherently like those available in 2014. What has changed is how the protestors are exploiting these resources. The protestors leveraged social media platforms and secure messaging applications to organize while decentralizing their leadership chain.¹⁰³ The protestors' ability to organize mass demonstrations throughout all of Hong Kong demonstrates the strength of their decentralized communication network and its capacity to mobilize its resources.¹⁰⁴ The decentralization of the execution and decision-making process provides a means for the

⁹⁶ Cragun, 234.

⁹⁷ Hanberg.

⁹⁸ Hanberg.

⁹⁹ Hanberg.

¹⁰⁰ Hanberg.

¹⁰¹ Martin Pubrick, "A Report of the 2019 Hong Kong Protests," (Taylor and Francis Online, October 14, 2019), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03068374.2019.1672397>.

¹⁰² Singh.

¹⁰³ Amanda Tattersall, "What Can Advocacy Campaigners Learn from Hong Kong's Protests Movement?" (Mobilization Lab, September 13, 2019), <https://mobilisationlab.org/stories/what-can-advocacy-campaigners-learn-from-hong-kongs-protest-movement/>.

¹⁰⁴ Hanberg.

movement to execute as a leaderless organization, employ guerrilla-style “flash mob” protest tactics, and expeditiously dominate the narrative. These new means, enabled by social media and information technology, presents new opportunity structures not realized during the 2014 Umbrella Movement.

New Opportunity Structures Enabled by Social Media

Political opportunity theory denotes a third and final component that is necessary for the development of social movements – an opportunity must be present such that a polity is receptive or vulnerable to social movement contention.^{105 106} Since 1997, the government of Hong Kong had lost much of its capacity for political pluralism and institutional openness toward social contention and grievance resolution.^{107 108} Lacking formal avenues for contention, the protesters pursued new opportunities by exposing weaknesses within Chinese and Hong Kong institutions.^{109 110} When a political system is vulnerable to a challenge, it creates opportunities for a social movement.¹¹¹ One such vulnerability is a decline in a state's ability to repress political activism.¹¹² Social media and messaging platforms were pervasive during the 2014 Umbrella Movement.¹¹³ Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter were communication resources that instantly connected protestors, journalists, and allies around the globe.¹¹⁴ Although social media platforms remain mostly unchanged since the 2014 Umbrella Movement, what *has*

¹⁰⁵ Hanberg.

¹⁰⁶ Cragun, 234.

¹⁰⁷ Hanberg.

¹⁰⁸ Hanberg.

¹⁰⁹ Hanberg.

¹¹⁰ Hanberg.

¹¹¹ Cragun, 234.

¹¹² Cragun, 234.

¹¹³ Hanberg.

¹¹⁴ Emily Parker, “Social Media and the Hong Kong Protests,” (*New Yorker*, October 1, 2014), <https://www.newyorker.com/tech/annals-of-technology/social-media-hong-kong-protests>.

changed is that the protestors' ability to exploit social media to new potentials – exposing new vulnerabilities within the polity.¹¹⁵

“Flash Mob” Protests

The protestor-distributed communication process enabled demonstrations to rapidly emerge across Hong Kong to varying degrees of strength and autonomy. The protestors denote this “flash mob” style of protests as being like water in that the protestors and their locations are fluid. Throughout the protests, numerous demonstrations have rapidly appeared and just as quickly dispersed back into the city. Comparatively, the 2014 Umbrella Movement pursued an "occupation" strategy at a specified location and prescribed a strict leadership structure that directed protestor activity and decisions.¹¹⁶ The dispersed movements of 2019-2020 permitted the Hong Kong protestors to organize rapidly at different locations throughout the city and disrupt the responsiveness of the Hong Kong police force. In August 2019, the protestors coordinated large-scale city-wide strikes and altering tactics weeks later by storming the Hong Kong Airport, which disrupted air travel to and from the city.¹¹⁷ The effects of these guerrilla-style “flash mob” protests have perturbed the Hong Kong government and its police force while also dramatically impacting the economic stability of the island. Although Hong Kong’s economy is suffering from other negative economic drivers (e.g., tariff wars with the United States, and COVID-19), the protests are contributing to Hong Kong’s current recession.¹¹⁸ Threatening the financial viability of the island is a means for the protestors to directly challenge the legitimacy of the Hong Kong government by disrupting its economic stability.

¹¹⁵ Hanberg.

¹¹⁶ Tattersall.

¹¹⁷ Jin Wu, et al., “116 Days of Hong Kong Protests,” (*New York Times*, October 3, 2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/world/asia/hong-kong-protests-arc.html>.

¹¹⁸ Grace Shao, “Hong Kong Just Entered a Recession. Experts Say Economy Will 'Remain Weak' amid Protests, Trade War,” CNBC (CNBC, November 1, 2019), <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/11/01/hong-kong-recession-economy-will-remain-weak-amid-protests-trade-war.html>.

Leaderless Movement

The 2014 Umbrella Movement abruptly ended when its leaders turned themselves over to the Hong Kong police and urged protestors to disperse, citing concerns over growing police brutality.¹¹⁹ ¹²⁰ The movements centralized organizational structure permitted the Hong Kong police to isolate and directly challenge the leadership chain responsible for organizing the protests.¹²¹ By applying pressure to the protest leaders, the Hong Kong government dissolved the demonstrations and ended the movement.¹²² ¹²³ By 2019, the Hong Kong protestors learned from their mistakes and prioritized maintaining anonymity by exploiting encryption and decentralizing its organizational structure.¹²⁴ Today's social movement in Hong Kong claims to be a "leaderless" movement absent a central leadership structure.¹²⁵ ¹²⁶ In practice, the movement exploits messaging applications, online forums, and social media platforms to ensure protest knowledge is archived and decentralized.¹²⁷ The movement is also able to plan their next protest action collectively and rapidly execute protest actions – challenging the responsiveness of the polity.¹²⁸ By using social media applications, the protestors demonstrate an ability to quickly self-organize, adapt protest tactics, and achieve consensus when codifying its demands.¹²⁹ This distributed organization campaign disrupts the government's ability to isolate and silence the key

¹¹⁹ Hanberg.

¹²⁰ Adam Connors, "Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement: A Timeline of Key Events One Year On" (*ABC News*, June 15, 2019), <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-09-28/timeline-hong-kong-umbrella-movement-one-year-on/6802388>.

¹²¹ Hanberg.

¹²² Hanberg.

¹²³ Connors.

¹²⁴ Grace Shao, "Social Media has Become a Battleground in Hong Kong's Protest," (*CNBC.com*, August 16, 2019), <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/08/16/social-media-has-become-a-battleground-in-hong-kongs-protests.html>.

¹²⁵ Hanberg.

¹²⁶ Magnus Ag, "Inside Hong Kong's Leaderless Uprising," (*The Diplomat*, October 24, 2019), <https://thediplomat.com/2019/10/inside-hong-kongs-leaderless-uprising/>.

¹²⁷ Hanberg.

¹²⁸ Ag.

¹²⁹ Ag.

leaders facilitating the protest movement.¹³⁰ The collective leadership structure also ensures the objectives of the movement endure despite protestors being beaten, arrested, or killed.¹³¹ The Hong Kong government is unable to identify protestor leadership nodes in pursuit of the resolution strategy exploited in 2014¹³². Hong Kong's inability to suppress the movement by targeting its leaders presents a vulnerability opportunity that permits the 2019-2020 protests to endure despite escalating violence.¹³³

Narrative Ownership

The 2019-2020 "battle for public opinion" has led to the weaponization of social media platforms as the protestors compete to maintain public sentiment while challenging the actions of the Hong Kong government.¹³⁴ ¹³⁵ ¹³⁶ As part of the movement's narrative campaign, the participants capture images and videos of police brutality for distribution to increase awareness, advocacy, and accountability.¹³⁷ The on-the-ground and real-time media transmission to news agencies around the world presents a compelling counter-narrative to that provided by mainland China and Hong Kong.¹³⁸ China's reluctance to intervene in the protests through direct military or national police action indicates an institutional vulnerability.¹³⁹ China's advancement as a world leader requires it to consider potential international backlash if it chooses to pursue draconian measures to subdue the protestors, eliciting a modern version of the Tiananmen Square massacre.¹⁴⁰ While the protestors maintain dominance in the war of public opinion, the Hong

¹³⁰ Hanberg.

¹³¹ Hanberg.

¹³² Hanberg.

¹³³ Hanberg.

¹³⁴ Hanberg.

¹³⁵ Shao, "Social Media..."

¹³⁶ Shao, "Social Media..."

¹³⁷ Shao, "Social Media..."

¹³⁸ Hanberg.

¹³⁹ Hanberg.

¹⁴⁰ Hanberg.

Kong government and mainland China are hard-pressed to pursue outright draconian measures to silence the protests. The ability of the protests to own the narrative provides increased international awareness and access to new allies. Most notably, on November 27, 2019, the United States signed into law the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act, which permits The United States government to sanction Hong Kong human rights abusers.¹⁴¹ Shortly after, a second bill was approved that barred American companies from selling crowd control devices to the Hong Kong police.¹⁴² The innovative protest strategies used during the 2019-2020 Hong Kong protest movement exposed new opportunities and exploitable vulnerabilities within the Hong Kong government and China. The employment of a “flash mob” protest strategy, leaderless organizational structure, and an aggressive social media campaign reduced the ability of mainland China and Hong Kong’s government to repress the social movement – presenting new opportunities for the protestors to advance their claims.¹⁴³

Current Status as of April 2020

As of April 2020, the protests are ongoing and have entered their second consecutive year. The end of 2019 presented a rapid escalation in violence resulting in protestors using petrol bombs and primitive weapons amidst growing concerns of police brutality and human rights violations. Mass protests related to the movement rapidly died down due to the onset of the COVID-19 in early 2020. The scale of protests diminished compared to those witnessed in 2019; those that have occurred have been small, sporadic, and quickly dispersed.¹⁴⁴ Lacking vast mobilization opportunities, groups of protestors have resorted to firebombing government and

¹⁴¹ Alex Leff and Emily Feng, “Trump Angers China By Signing Law Backing Hong Kong Protesters,” November 28, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/11/28/783529916/trump-angers-china-by-signing-law-backing-hong-kong-protesters>.

¹⁴² Leff.

¹⁴³ Hanberg.

¹⁴⁴ Mary Hui, “Hong Kong Police Are Using Coronavirus Restrictions to Clamp down on Protesters,” Quartz (Quartz, April 3, 2020), <https://qz.com/1829892/hong-kong-police-use-coronavirus-rules-to-limit-protests/>.

police offices.¹⁴⁵ COVID provides new opportunity structures that both the Hong Kong government and protestors are leveraging. Protestors place the blame for COVID's spread on the failure of the Hong Kong government to institute protective measures – further inflaming their grievances and the protestor narrative.¹⁴⁶ The Hong Kong government, citing legitimate health concerns, is increasing control on the island by limiting movement, health inspection checkpoints, and controlling population flows.¹⁴⁷ Unfortunately, the Hong Kong protestors are losing control of the narrative, not to the Hong Kong government, but the COVID pandemic that is threatening the rest of the globe. The outlook for the 2019-2020 Hong Kong protest movement is questionable. As summer approaches, so does the July 1 anniversary of Hong Kong's annual pro-democracy marches, presenting an opportunity to rekindle the movement.

Recommendations for Further Analysis

If the 2019-2020 protests continue, it is still unclear if the movement will achieve success. Understanding the effectiveness of the new opportunity structures presented requires an assessment post-termination of the movement – specifically in terms of grievance resolution. Even if the movement fails to achieve the prescribed Five Demands, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the movement may overshadow the effectiveness of the opportunity structures. Other potential opportunity structures not explored in this paper include the effect social media had on collective formation and participation. Of interest specifically is the collective identity formed around the Five Demands presented by the movement. The adherence to a defined and non-negotiable end-state is a potentially new opportunity structure that further advances movement resiliency and longevity. The defined end-state presents a challenge if the Hong Kong government seeks negotiations with the protestors. Absent complete resolution of the Five

¹⁴⁵ Mary Hui, “Hong Kong Police ...”

¹⁴⁶ Mary Hui, “Hong Kong Police ...”

¹⁴⁷ Mary Hui, “Hong Kong Police ...”

Demands, the leaderless movement coupled with specific end-state objectives, provides a means for the protest to endure indefinitely, regardless of any appeasement attempts by the Hong Kong government.

Comparing the 2014 Umbrella Movement and 2019-2020 Hong Kong Protests highlights these new opportunity structures, meriting further academic assessment. Since the protests are ongoing, academic research, survey data, and exploitable social media information are severely lacking. As with the 2014 protests, academic research shortly followed protest termination as social movement theorists worked to assess why the Umbrella Movement failed. The results of the 2019-2020 Hong Kong Protests will prove enlightening regardless of the outcome, and undoubtedly, shape future protest strategies aiming to leverage social media as a mobilization resource.

Conclusion

The 2019-2020 Hong Kong protestors adopted lessons from the failed 2014 Umbrella Movement to evolve their strategy and expose new opportunity structures. By pursuing “flash mob” protest tactics, the protestors thwarted the counter-tactics used by the Hong Kong government and police. Operating as a decentralized and leaderless social movement disrupted the Hong Kong government's ability to isolate key leaders and force demobilization. The ability of the protestors to dominate the narrative challenged the credibility of Hong Kong's government domestically and internationally. The adoption of these new tactics provides a means for enhancing protest longevity and resiliency despite the well-documented human rights violations by the Hong Kong government. Absent a defined territorial battleground, exploitable leaders, and unhindered ownership of the narrative, the Hong Kong government struggles to repress the movement. In its frustration, Hong Kong and China have escalated violence and adopted

aggressive repression techniques – inciting additional protestor grievances. The advancement of protestor tactics between 2014 and today signals an evolution for modern social movements and brokers a new-age of guerrilla protests. Other movements, whether admirable or reprehensible, can adopt these tactics to force a political or social agenda – equally challenging authoritarian and democratic ideologies alike. This new reality of social movements compels increased awareness of these new opportunity structures to identify means for enabling progressive movements while thwarting nefarious ones.

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