Ordinary citizens and political crises: The Hong Kong Anti-Extradition Movement (2019-2020)

Ciudadanos corrientes y crisis políticas: El movimiento anti-extradición de Hong-Kong (2019-2020)

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ABSTRACT:

This study focuses on the actions and perceptions of individuals who participated in the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill (Anti-ELAB) movement in Hong Kong initiated in April 2019 and interrupted by the covid 19 pandemic and the adoption of the National Security Law in June 2020. Based on semi-structured interviews, the article explains how ordinary citizens and first-time activists helped shape a political crisis and how it changed their political perceptions. The study adopts a theoretical perspective inspired by studies of collective action in contexts of political crises, placing the individual at the centre of the analysis and adopting a situational and processual approach. The findings show that the actors perceived themselves as protagonists of historical events produced by the authoritarian turn of the Hong Kong political system thanks to the appropriation of new identities, the radicalisation of their liberal values and the mobilisation of their previous skills and resources.

Keywords: Authoritarianism – Hong Kong – China – political crisis – social movements.

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RESUMEN

Este estudio se centra en las acciones y percepciones de los individuos que participaron en el movimiento contrario al proyecto de enmienda de la ley de extradición (Anti-ELAB) en Hong Kong iniciado en abril de 2019 e interrumpido por la pandemia de covid 19 y la adopción de la Ley de Seguridad Nacional en junio de 2020. Basado en entrevistas semiestructuradas, el artículo explica cómo los ciudadanos corrientes y los activistas primerizos ayudaron a dar forma a una crisis política y cómo esta modificó sus percepciones políticas. El estudio adopta una perspectiva teórica inspirada en estudios de acción colectiva en contextos de crisis política, colocando al individuo en el centro del análisis y adoptando un enfoque situacional y procesual. Los hallazgos muestran que los actores se percibieron a sí mismos como protagonistas de eventos históricos producidos por el giro autoritario del sistema político de Hong Kong gracias a la apropiación de nuevas identidades, la radicalización de sus valores liberales y la movilización de sus habilidades y recursos previos.

Palabras clave: Autoritarismo – crisis política – Hong Kong – China – movimientos sociales.

Introduction

In the spring of 2019 in Hong Kong, we witnessed the most significant mobilisation, known as the anti-extradition law amendment bill movement (Anti-ELAB), in the short history of its political system, which has often been considered an incomplete democracy (Chan, 2018; Scott, 2017; Serrano-Moreno, 2021). Indeed, its political transition –the creation of the Special Administrative Region of Hong Kong in 1997– did not include effective citizen participation even if it allowed under the principle of "one country, two systems" the constitution of a pluralist society with limited citizen participation spaces through elections, political parties and civil society organisations. Therefore, its political system was affected by a democratic deficit that facilitated the progressive hatching of a political crisis that reached a climax in 2019. This scenario partially explains how the mobilisations that started with the opposition to a concrete government measure –the extradition bill– turned rapidly into a large-scale anti-authoritarian and pro-democratic mobilisation with revolutionary overtones (Lee et al., 2019; Lo et al., 2021; Serrano-Moreno and Osorio, 2023). Therefore, The Anti-ELAB case represents a massive politicisation in the context of growing authoritarianism.

This study focuses on the actions and perceptions of citizens who participated in these protests adopting a theoretical approach inspired by situational and processual studies of collective action in the context of political crises (Dobry 2009a; Bennani-Chraïbi and Fillieule, 2012; Fillieule, 2010). As some social movement scholars have pointed out, putting the individuals, particularly the first-time activists, in the centre of the analysis is not a conventional approach in many of the studies of the 2010's wave of contention (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013; Ancelovici, Dufour and Nez, 2016). Our objective is to understand how ordinary citizens contribute to shaping political crises and, in return, how the experience of participating in collective action shapes them.

We consider the protestors actors we interviewed as "ordinary citizens" because they lack the usual political competence or abilities and organisational resources of traditional political actors or experienced activists. One of the early studies of this movement, based on onsite surveys during the summer of 2019 (Lee et al., 2019, p. 13), showed that a vast majority of participants were "self-mobilised"; they did not join the protests following the instructions of an organisation, but they learnt about it on social media, and the vast majority came

with friends, relatives, classmates or colleagues (Lee et al., 2019, p. 14). Their previous political experiences were mainly limited to a brief visit to the camp of the Umbrella Movement or to march in one of the routinised demonstrations on the anniversaries of the handover of Hong Kong to China on 1 July and the Tiananmen incident on 4 June (Hung and Ip, 2012). In other cases, such as high-school students, the Anti-ELAB movement represents their political initiation.

This study uses data collected through 30 semi-structured interviews with 25 individuals, adding up to more than 60 recorded hours. In addition to that, participant observations in demonstrations, visits to Lennon Walls[1] and reviewing news and social media content gave us a contextualised familiarity with the field. The interviews were conducted between January and September 2020 via online platforms in Cantonese. The interviewees were primarily recruited through Telegrams public groups where protestors sought opportunities to share their testimonies with journalists and researchers.

Our findings confirmed the politicisation experienced by the actors and the radicalisation of previous values and opinions. The actors lived intense experiences that made them self-perceived protagonists of a historical event, resulting in the gain of objective and subjective political abilities. Also, we observed how the actors' lack of organisational resources paradoxically contributes to explaining the continuity of the movement for almost one year in an adverse context. The mobilisation of personal and professional resources, at first glance, apolitical, became more destabilising than the traditional strategies.

Political background

In February 2019, the Hong Kong government announced a bill amendment that would create an extradition mechanism with China, triggering an unprecedented wave of mobilisations from April 2019 to January 2020. In the summer of 2019, the violent clashes between protestors and police and the massive repression produced a critical juncture where many citizens were urged to act using whatever resources they were at their disposal. The initial focus of the protesters on the bill shifted quickly to police brutality, and

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1 The Lennon Walls were temporary public urban spaces in numerous and various locations where citizens posted written messages and visual materials. The spontaneous messages of support and graphic and artistic posters showed how the citizens symbolically appropriated the protest. They also use the walls to communicate, to inform practical information, such as step-by-step advice related to preparation for the protests, police arrests procedures, health care issues during the pandemic, and lists of yellow (pan-democratic) and blue (pro-establishment) businesses sorted by areas to promote conscious consumption. Also, at the Lennon Walls, opponents of the protests would tear down the messages, which would then be rapidly replaced.

later the movement became an anti-authoritarian and "anti-mainlandization uprising" (Lo, 2020; Lo et al., 2021). In early 2020, the protests decreased drastically because of the covid 19 pandemic social distance measures and on 30 June, the central government adopted the Law on Safeguarding National Security in Hong Kong, which created new criminal offences such as rebellion or secession and allowed Chinese officials to work in the autonomous region for the first time (Serrano-Moreno, 2022). Since then, many citizens and political leaders have fled the country, deleted their social media profiles, and dissolved political organisations (Serrano-Moreno and Osorio, 2023). This law represents, so far, an efficient deterrence for contentious politics.

Concerning the key events, the peaceful demonstrations on 9 June and 16 June 2019– the latter gathered around 2 million people out of a population of 7.4 million – did not obtain the withdrawal of the extradition bill and were dissolved by the police. As the indignation grew, during July, some critical events occurred, such as the occupation of the Legislative Council on 1 July, the vandalism of the Chinese national emblem at the Liaison Office building (central government authority) on 21 July and the "white terror" attack in the Yuen Long Mass Transit Railway (MTR) station on that same date, in which alleged triads members attacked demonstrators. On 4 September, the Chief Executive announced that the bill was "dead", but this did not stop the protests but escalated the situation to violent demonstrations and sporadic clashes. Among these, the siege of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University from 17 to 29 November, where young demonstrators occupied the campus to avoid arrests, represents a notorious episode of unprecedented violence.

During the protests, "Liberate Hong Kong, the revolution of our time" was one of the most frequently chanted slogans probably because it summarised the feeling shared by many ordinary citizens of being potential agents of their history. Before being popularised in social media, the currently jailed activist Edward Leung Tin-kei coined the motto in his campaign in the 2016 Legislative Council by-election before the government disqualified him for his pro-independence public statements. He became a prominent figure of the so-called "localism", which openly claims self-determination, legitimates violent action against tyranny and rejects the peaceful strategies advocated by pan-democrat organisations and political parties (Cheng, 2014; Yuen and Chung, 2018). The spread of such ideas from the activist milieu to the public illustrates the evolution of Hong Kong politics before the hatch of the Anti-ELAB movement.

The radicalisation of Hong Kong civil society seems evident if we compare the protests in 2019 and the Umbrella Movement in 2014, mainly based on peaceful civil disobedience and the occupation of public spaces (Cheng, 2016; Cheng and Chan, 2016). Also, in 2019 protestors adopted a new strategy that they described with the motto "be water". No more occupations of public spaces were attempted, nor anyone claimed leadership. The protesters went anonymous using encrypted messenger apps and took on more creative approaches such as calls for sporadic protest events, organising the G20 advertisement campaign worldwide, lobbying Western governments, and forming "Yellow economy" circles (conscious consumption).

By and large, the radicalisation of the Hong Kong protest can be explained by the frustration of many citizens being restricted from participating in their political system. The absence of an entirely free election system blocked the renovation of the political personnel and the introduction of new topics in the government agenda, as we observed in the de-escalation of massive mobilisations in other parts of the world in the 2010s. In this context, since 2014, the distrust of the Hong Kong government has grown along with the perception that contentious politics were the last way to act (Yuen, 2018; Yuen and Cheng, 2018). In short, the Hong Kong "one country, two systems"

semi-democratic hybrid regime (Chen, 2009; Lo, 2015) took an authoritarian turn that has provoked a political impasse (Chan, 2018; Hung, 2018).

Theoretical framework

This study is neither to find the causes of the Anti-ELAB movement nor to explain it retrospectively by identifying cultural or historical factors or the critical actions of some leaders. As Francophile studies on social movements and political crises point out (Dobry 2009a; 2009b), we prefer to focus on the trajectories of the individuals and their micro-decisions and interactions in the middle of critical junctures characterised by uncertainty and "political fluidity" (Bennani-Chraïbi and Fillieule, 2012; Deluermoz and Gobille, 2015). In these configurations, we observe what Michel Dobry (2009a, p. 17) calls a "desectoralisation of social space", where the previous political dynamics blur and the actors' decisions are linked by a "broadened tactical interdependence".

Based on participant observation and interviews, some studies have employed this approach to analyse 2010s mobilisations, such as the Egyptian revolution, Indignados in Spain, the Maidan movement in Ukraine or the Nuit Debout and Yellow Vests in France (El Chazli, 2012; Serrano-Moreno, 2012; Goujon and Shukan, 2015, Smaoui, 2017; Reungoat et al., 2020).

These studies identified the presence of first-time protestors as a critical factor for the escalation of events as they occupied a public space for weeks where unprecedented social interactions took place. In these cases, we observe how the routinised logic of the political camp is disrupted due to the penetration of outsiders who carry exogenous logics with them (Dobry, 2009a, p. 171). Usually, these outsiders are first-time activists mobilised through social media and personal milieux without previous activists' experiences and political socialisation. The anticipations and calculations of both hardcore activists and authorities tend to be clouded, and sometimes they are counterproductive, contributing to letting the situation spin out of control. For instance, the use of force by the police often inversely provokes an intensification of the protests. Sometimes, the multisectoral mobilisations may encourage defections in the government camp; the military would be the paradigmatic case. The desectorisation of the social space can eventually provoke a change of the government, or even the regime itself, as it happened in the last decade in Egypt, Tunisia or Ukraine but did not occur in Spain, France or Hong Kong.

The Anti-ELAB movement produced a political crisis due to its massive support and multisectoral mobilisations. However, it did not reach a "revolutionary situation" – according to Charles Tilly's conceptualisation – mainly because of the absence of desertions within the government camp that could have provoked a dual power (Tilly, 1996, p. 10). With the social-distancing measures implemented against the covid 19 pandemic and the adoption of the National Security Law in June 2020 (Serrano-Moreno, 2022), the sectorisation of social life terminated the Hong Kong "revolution". However, judging a mobilisation only by its outcome would be too simplistic. The actors' experiences and interactions may present dynamics comparable to other contexts, even if not every large-scale mobilisation produced the same outcomes.

The renewal of the historiography of the French Revolution gives us some clues in this regard (Deluermoz y Gobille, 2015b). Haïm Burstin has deepened this approach with his anthropological study on the French Revolution using biographies of individuals without previous political experience who became self-perceived "protagonists" of the events as "they exited anonymity to enrol themselves durably in history" (Burstin, 2010, pp. 8-9; Burstin, 2013). Burstin's work on how ordinary Parisians became "revolutionaries" can contribute to understanding first-time activists' commitment during political crises. The "protagonists" experienced an intensification of time and life and became public figures while discovering their ability to act and transform the world.

These works on political crises and the 2010s wave of contention invite us to explore new perspectives on the study of contemporary social movements. Consequently, we need to distance ourselves from the traditional assumptions of organisational resources and political competence as primary conditions for individuals to join collective actions, which resemble more "connective actions" without public leaders or stable organisations (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013). To understand what the "networks of outrage and hope" (Castells, 2015) are made of and go beyond a description of events and repertoires, we advocate putting the individual actors in the centre of the analysis adopting a situational and processual perspective (Fillieule, 2010).

Actors' profiles and predispositions

As suggested by Olivier Fillieule, to put the individuals at the centre of the analysis requires to introduce of the notion of a biographical career, inspired by the symbolic interactionist theory, to identify factors that influenced the engagement and disengagement in collective actions in different moments of the actors' trajectories[2]. To understand how the actors' predispositions influenced their

actions during the protest, we divided our interviewees into two ideal-typical categories: yung-mo, valiant-martial protester) and wo-lei-fei, peaceful-rational-nonviolent protester). The interviewees generously use these categories to describe themselves, and they essentially represent a generational division within the first-time activists carrying with them stereotypical predispositions characteristic of their age group. The first category is yung-mo, also often known as "front-liners". They are 18- to 28-year-olds who participated in violent actions against the police. The second category is wo-lei-fei, who are mainly older and participated in demonstrations and other relatively peaceful actions, primarily mobilising their resources and skills, and all of them have received higher education.

The youngest protestors we met explained that before 2019, they considered themselves "kong pigs", a derogatory term used among internet users in Hong Kong to criticise the laziness and consumerism of the young generation who is used to comfort and is largely apolitical. The frequent use of the image of a pig, sometimes opposed to a dog –a symbol of the police– both in social media and on Lennon Walls, shows a reverse of the stigma among the young protestors proud of their new commitment. The actors describe their first experiences in the demonstrations of June as an irreversible "awakening" (sic.) from their previous political indifference. A 28 year

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2   Among these factors are the "primary and secondary political socialisation, the strength of 'role taking' and dependence on the activist group, the existence or not of reconversion opportunities, and political context" (Fillieule, 2010, p. 3).

yung-mo narrates her previous attitudes in these terms:

> At that time (before 2019), I only cared about things related to me (…). I was still a kong pig. I thought, "it's not my business". But until this time, it's the business of everyone.

Before they actively joined the protests, these first-time front-liners had a hunch that something was wrong, which was slowly confirmed by reading posts and news on the internet, especially in the local version of Reddit: the LIHKG collaborative online forum. Another yung-mo, an 18 years old high school student, narrated his experience similarly:

> I see myself originally as a kong pig. In 2014, during the umbrella movement, I was at secondary. I thought Joshua Wong and the gang were right, but I was a kong pig (…). Then it was 12 June, in LIHKG, people said, "if you don't go, HK will be finished", "you have to go", so I thought I had to go on that day after school. I changed, and then I went out.

When asked about the reasons for his increasing commitment after the demonstrations of early June, he quoted one of the most reiterated sayings on social media at the time:

> It's like what others said, "you woke up, and you can't go back to sleep again". On 12 June, I witnessed the tyranny, the violence done by the system, and how the government suppressed the people; when people demanded a withdrawal (of the extradition bill), the government answered with tear gas and rubber bullets. After that, I was awakened, then I am no longer a kong pig; I can't sleep back; I wish I could.

Among the young protestors, as anticipated, we observe that their familiarity with social media facilitated the diffusion of new frames that influenced how they read reality. These frames partially compensated for the almost total absence of political socialisation either in traditional organisations or within their families. Talking politics at home was very rare, but in the summer of 2019, the news imposed such topics as over dinner with the TV news playing in the background. The yung-mo tried to avoid controversial issues in front of their parents and to hide their participation in the protests, for example, by changing clothes and hiding masks, gloves and helmets before going home. Another 18 old high school student explains how he kept silent and lied to his parents until his actions became too obvious:

> -Do your parents talk about politics at home?
> -Depends. Very rarely. Recently they talked about the protests. Since my grandfather is blue (pro-China), you must be careful. (…) My

grandfather said that 4 June (Tiananmen incident) was all done by foreign power… I thought to myself, "fuck off"(…)

-*How did your family respond to your participation?*

-They know I went to protests but didn't know exactly what I did. (…) I told them I went out for fun. I don't want them to worry. For the PolyU (Polytechnic University) and Chinese U (Chinese University of Hong Kong) sieges, I said I wanted to go out; they knew already where I wanted to go, being their son, they knew without needing to be told. They saw I changed and said, "you can't go out".

The direct or indirect experience of the 2014 Umbrella Movement also influenced the actors' commitment in 2019, although it came from direct experience or what they read or listened to from others. More concretely, the disappointment of the Umbrella Movement made them understand that they needed to adopt new strategies. A 25-years-old interviewee narrates his brief and rather superficial experience in 2014 and his final feeling of emptiness:

-*Do you remember how you felt when the 2014 umbrella movement was finished?*

-The thing I remember the most was… looking at the empty streets. Because the government did not respond to any of the demands

then, in 2014, I was already interested in politics. But the movement in 2014 failed, and then I began to despair of it. Afterwards, I still read the news and paid attention to political issues, but I thought it would be tough to mobilise people again. This time on 9 June, I didn't go out. However, later on, I couldn't stand it anymore, so I went out.

The lessons learnt from the Umbrella Movement represent a shared disposition that explains the radicalisation of the protests in 2019. Within these lessons, we find leaders' refusal and the efforts to reduce or hide the divisions between violent and peaceful protestors. During the anti-extradition marches, we observed that demonstrators chanted slogans, also posted on social media, such as "five demands, not one less", "no differentiation between peaceful and valiant protesters", "no snitching", "no severing of ties" and "no fomenting of splits". These slogans are, in reality, maxims based on implicit references to the mistakes of 2014.

The studies mentioned above on the 2010 wave of contention point out the diffusion of frames and repertoire of contention from experienced activists to new ones. However, in Hong Kong, this diffusion happened more frequently in the opposite way; the first-time activists brought new resources and critically regarded the traditional strategies associated with the defeat of 2014. For instance, the

Citizen's Press Conference is a group of activists that initially succeeded in attracting media attention with their conferences in which they wore masks and helmets, seemingly representing protesters but emphasised that they only represented themselves. They aim to provide counter-discourse to the official ones the Hong Kong authorities delivered. The high cultural capital and previous political experiences of these activists enable them to identify the weakness of institutions and hence try to exploit them. However, most interviewees we encountered tended to reject institutional-oriented strategies. We observed this rejection among the young interviewees who adopted the "burnism" discourse, synthesised by the expression "lam chao" (perish together), meaning that Hong Kong should burn rather than accept a deeper integration with mainland China.

The second group of protestors we encountered was the wo-lei-fei, older, more peaceful and economically more capable than the yung-mo. They supported the latter by demonstrating before the clashes started and donating money and equipment, such as anti-tear gas masks, helmets, and later food coupons. The yung-mo refers to these protestors as "parents", implying intergenerational solidarity. A role enormously appreciated was the "school bus drivers", who are individuals organised in small groups online to give a ride to protestors after clashes with the police. A 38-year-old information technology specialist explains how he decided to pick up protestors for the first time as the incident of 21 July in Yuen Long MTR station happens. That day, watching the news, he thought some protestors might need alternative transportation in the chaos. In the following weeks, he found Telegram groups where anonymous administrators connected the "school kids" with the "school bus drivers" in real time. He describes that experience has touched him:

> I was a bit nervous as I went out. I was worried about what would happen as I entered Yuen Long. However, luckily, as I arrived at the station, I saw many cars doing the same thing, that they were also waiting to pick up someone. As I saw this, I was especially pleased. That tells me that Hong Kong people are not so indifferent. Not only me who is willing to help, you know there is no exchange of benefit involved (…). You could easily risk having your car's window smashed by someone in this situation, or you need money to support, so I was very pleased and was touched to see them out there.

Asked about his overall feeling about the 2019 protests, he praised the young protestors as no longer the "useless" video-game-playing kids. These recognitions reflect an emotional gratification produced by the direct experience of being part of collective action.

In other words, "the action itself is its reward" (Sawicki and Siméant, 2009, p. 103). Studies on social movements and political parties have already noted this phenomenon when explaining the retributions of collective actions other than by a merely rational conception of incentives (Gaxie, 2005). We believe the emotional gratification produced by the collective action is more decisive in contexts where the actors perceived the events as a historical events than in a social movement with routinised dynamics.

We observe a similar feeling of self-accomplishment in the rest of the wo-lei-fei, which also possess a low or null political background and a high cultural capital. We interviewed three university scholars that mobilised their academic skills and connections, or, as one of them put it, they did "air-conditioned things". The most complex action we observed was the creation of real-time maps during big protests by a team led by one of our interviewees with teammates composed of 6 to 12 members. They scouted around onsite for the police locations – among which more information was collected, such as the type of equipment, vehicles and blocked streets and roads. They created maps with those pieces of information and published them in a Telegram public channel so the protestors could forward and share them. Some of their maps reached up to 500,000 views. He decided to start this project after seeing the

live streaming of the Shatin clashes; a peaceful rally descended into heavy clashes in his childhood working-class neighbourhood and was the first time the police shot tear gas in a shopping mall, making many civilians unable to find way-outs. He wanted to stop this from happening again.

-What was the biggest urge that pushed you to do something?
-(Long silence) Perhaps it was a thought that "if we carry on like this… what do we do?". Also, in July, I knew that to produce such a map, you would need certain skill sets, including personal connections, and I realised that I have all these skills. So, I tried my best to give it a go.

Asked about what he thinks about his contribution, he talked about the commitment of his team:

I know many sau-zuk (comrades) have used our maps in the protests; that way, it's useful. Sometimes it can defuse certain bloody scenes, which may not be very often, but once or twice … fewer casualties … it is meaningful. Of course, I didn't expect it to last so long in the beginning. At the beginning of August, I was already embarrassed to ask people to help me because once you were engaged, you lost your whole weekend; after a week of work, you gave your weekend to this; after one week, two weeks,

three weeks … I didn't dare ask if they would be available again next week. However, as it continued, I didn't need to ask anymore; we all knew we would continue, and we have done it for half a year.

They felt an intense gratification as they realised that their maps had reached thousands of "sau-zuk" (comrades) during the most violent demonstrations in the history of Hong Kong. This pushed them to continue working through this small group of scholars, which suddenly transformed them into highly skilled activists and protagonists of historical events. Another scholar mobilised different skills, mainly his capacity to connect people. Due to his background, he had connections among humanitarian NGOs and social work professionals, so he joined a supporting team of around 50 people helping the yung-mo in trouble.

At some point, many NGOs started to provide backstage support, such as financial and material aid, a shelter for those protesters who could not go home. (…) I was invited to join (one of) them because of my background in academic research. Also, I used to help my father in his business, and I have social work experience; they wanted me to help them to connect with different people.

They represent, indeed, another highly skilled group of wo-lei-fei. For example, during the siege of the Hong Kong Polytechnique University in November, they introduced medical staff to the campus and arranged private transportation for the yung-mo who managed to escape. The group coordinated their actions offline by analogue calls and face-to-face meetings, fearing that the police could hack their communications. This modus operandi reinforced the group's cohesion as they believed they were taking risks and needed to trust each other to avoid legal actions or lose their jobs. At that time, the media informed that some teachers and professors got fired after being arrested during the protests.

The decision to join the protest

The description done by the actors of a drastic political awakening is the result of introducing a lineal narrative in how they present themselves. By doing so, they give coherence to their actions, in this case, a sudden change of behaviour perceived as rupture: the end of their apolitical indifference and the beginning of an intense commitment to collective action. We find a similar logic in studies on political socialisation, inspired by the classic contribution of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman, that analyse biographical bifurcations or ruptures that the constructivist authors called "alternation" or "resocialisation" (Berger and Luckman, 1991; Fillieule, 2010, p. 6; Gaxie,

2002, p. 163; Serrano-Moreno, 2012). This process can be broadly characterised as highly emotional, often based on integrating into a new group and reinterpreting the individual past.

Consequently, we believe a causal and linear approach to individual trajectories does not explain the complexity of the subjective process behind the motivation of ordinary citizens to participate in a protest for the first time. In other words, it is impossible to reduce the decision to act to one reason or isolate it from the context of one experience. The actors' predispositions and the configurations in which they are placed influence their choices differently. However, during the interviews, we asked the actors if they could recall the moment they decided to protest and why. Adopting a processual approach, we tried to make them rationalise their motivations to understand how their values allow them to read reality. In some cases, the actors narrated experiences that provoked an adverse emotional reaction, and they judged incompatible with their values.

For instance, in his study of the Tahir uprising in 2011, Youssez El Chazli points out how the family and neighbourhood networks played a significant role in the ordinary citizen's decision to join the protests, more concretely the feeling of indignation created by witnessing friends injured by the police or the exposure for the first time to tear gas (El Chazli, 2012,

p. 93). Again, such sentiments are seemingly apolitical but rapidly became a motivation to act without the need for elaborated ideological frameworks. In Hong Kong, actors also referred to the experience of police brutality they suffered, or by friends or relatives, as the trigger of their commitment.

We already mentioned the experience of a wo-lei-fei who started thinking about how to contribute to the movement when he watched the live streaming of violent clashes in his old neighbourhood. Another interviewee, a 28 years-old yung-mo, explained the experience of "eating smoke and bullets" (sic.) in what she thought was a peaceful and routinised demonstration that she joined with her friends in early June:

> Because I was a wo-lei-fei, I thought I would not have to face that (tear gas), so I didn't wear anything (gears) (…) In such a residential area, I thought I would eat in one of the restaurants in that area (after the demonstration), but despite that, we got it (tear gas). Many people also started to upgrade themselves since that time.

Another yung-mo was doing an undergraduate degree overseas when he learned that some of his friends were injured. He decided to take a break from his studies and return to Hong Kong. He did not want to miss the "revolution of our time".

The first time was the two million people march (16 June) because, on 12 June, I had friends on the scene at the Legislative Council and got injured and confronted with tear gas. I was furious. Originally, I was not so interested in politics, but knowing friends that got injured and had been attacked, I got really angry; after the 2 million people marched, I started to participate and started a life of protest. (…) One of them (his friends) got heavily sprayed with pepper spray; I met him afterwards; he still got the rash on the skin, and it's swollen. I was shocked to see for the first time an injury done by police brutality.

The experience of breathing tear gas for the first time appears in many interviews. A housewife narrated the shock she resented as she witnessed clashes when she came back from a demonstration in her car with her friends:

I… couldn't accept the government's response. Because we marched peacefully on the street, they didn't listen to our voices; instead, they did something inconceivable, like shooting tear gas and beating the young people. I couldn't bear watching this … (…) We were sitting in my car, and tear gases were being shot out there. We saw "sauzuk" (comrades) and ordinary people on the street. I think that was the first time I smelt tear gas (…).

I was driving, and the car was moving, and the bullet just flew above our heads… Very chaotic; very sad to see Hong Kong becomes like this.

The actors considered such scenes "unacceptable" (sic.) employing a moral register. When asked why, they referred to general values that we can qualify as liberal, as if they were common sense, without further rational or ideological elaboration. The terms justice, freedom, democracy and the rule of law were repeatedly used to describe the actors' anger against police brutality and the government's refusal to accept the movement's demands. They perceived these demands as moderate and realistic, mainly abandoning the extradition bill and creating an independent investigation of police behaviour.

-*When was your first participation?*
-9 June, the demonstration and sit-in at the Central Government Complex. I was with my friend. A few days before, I looked back at the news and opinions about the extradition bill. All that meant that this time it would be damn serious; it would be the loss of Hong Kong's autonomy. Because it's about extradition, it's directly affecting the high autonomy and judicial independence.

The events of 2019 did not match anymore the image the actors had of

Hong Kong as a developed, peaceful and tolerant society. During their primary socialisation, the actors were educated in pluralistic and democratic values, so the events they witnessed in 2019 were hard to process as if they produced a social "destruction" of reality, a rupture of their common sense. In particular, the Yuen Long attack on 21 July was seen as a turning point when they realised they were living in extraordinary times. Since then, on the 21st of each month, protestors have gathered to commemorate the incident, trying to preserve the memory of this historical event.

I could not accept that (the Yuen Long attack). To a certain extent, I reckon it was a terrorist attack. The most terrible thing about it was not that there were these people who organised the attack, but the law enforcement agency who allowed it to happen and had not protected their citizens. It was the official breakdown of the police-community relations (…). That day was a watershed. Since that day, we have had a new slogan: "Yellow and blue are a matter of political views. Black and white are a matter of conscience"[3]. This is not a question of political views but an undifferentiated attack, a matter of safety.

Before contentious politics became common in Hong Kong, the public mainly considered the local police as a positive heritage from colonial times. The Police Force was often dubbed "Asia's finest" because of its highly trained personnel, integration into an independent bureaucracy, and reform in fighting against corruption in the 1970s. For instance, Hong Kong officials assisted mainland Chinese authorities in police reforms, particularly in training recruits and community activities (Lo, 2012). The second tear gas in Hong Kong history was only shot in 2014, the first being in the 1967 Hong Kong Riots, and since that moment, its reputation has not ceased to deteriorate, as more and more ordinary citizens realised they were witnessing the authoritarian transition of Hong Kong. Their realisation that the police had ceased to be a rule of law enforcer to become an authoritarian instrument produced indeed a profound shock that triggered the urge to act.

Some actors understood that they had to join the protest now because it may be the last chance to demonstrate freely in Hong Kong. The socialisation of liberal values pushed the actors to join a movement they perceived as a defence of freedom and democracy. What differentiates it from other movements worldwide is the absence of counter-hegemonic discourse

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3   Blue refers to the individual with pro-establishment or pro-central government political views; yellow refers to pro-democracy ones. In June 2019, demonstrators began wearing black clothes to protest against the government. During the Yuen Long incident, the attackers wore withe shirts and masks.

that challenges the legitimacy of established power. The actors perceived that the authorities were betraying the hegemonic values that founded the "one country, two systems" regime (Chi Hang, 2017; Scott, 2017). Notions such as freedom or democracy worked as floating signifiers that contributed to transforming ordinary citizens into anti-authoritarian activists.

Learning in the fight

During the protests, the actors' politicisation was based on two main aspects: first, learning or developing practical skills, and second, changing their perceptions of politics. For instance, the yung-mo learnt "in the act" the black block repertoire of contention, such as dismantling police barriers, mounting barricades, digging bricks, preparing and using defensive and offensive gears (gas masks, petrol bombs and shields), using code language and encrypted communicational tools among others. This 18-year-old yung-mo started practising in his neighbourhood, painting slogans on walls and testing gear. Once he felt prepared, he shared his new tricks with his friends, and they joined the frontline for the first time:

On 1 October (violent demonstration), I was leading a few inexperienced friends to feel social resistance. I teach them how to prepare basic gear, such as black block, tell them some basic points

for attention, and then do something very basic and simple, such as setting up a barricade, putting up umbrellas for other protesters, spraying surveillance cameras…

The young protestors learnt by observing the experienced ones and acting accordingly, especially in small groups of friends.

-Do you remember how you felt that day?
-In the beginning, I didn't know what they were doing. They are more experienced than I am. I was like a sponge; keep absorbing and absorbing. I had to know what's going on and what I would need to do if something dangerous happened. I had to learn a lot. As soon as I got to the scene, my mind went blank; you do what you see; it's hard to think. Luckily, I had friends next to me; otherwise, I would have died.

During the protests, the yung-mo also learnt different skills related to communicating and coordinating with others, and they employed them back in their neighbourhoods or communities. Some of them organised assemblies, and human chains, distributed propaganda materials in the Lennon Walls or met new classmates or neighbours that also supported the movement. For instance, some young protestors started to collaborate with pan-democrat district

councillors to prevent police abuses and to assist arrested protestors. Some described a change of personality that made them more attentive to others and more conscious about their local community. Nevertheless, others were less optimistic about the changes they experienced. They explained how they suffer stress when recalling their most violent souvenirs or become more alert when walking on the streets. More generally, they feel hopeless about the future of Hong Kong. Some actors mention "psychological problems" (sic.) amplified by the impossibility of sharing their experiences openly to protect themselves from the authorities and to hide their acts from their families. One of the interviewees lived an extreme experience of being caught up in the Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU) siege and could leave the campus without being arrested because he was a minor at that time and had to register his personal information with the police:

> I always have this problem, sometimes I feel very sad, in despair, traumatised, we cannot talk to the others, so we have to keep it to ourselves. Sometimes I have to avoid seeing related news, documentaries... We cannot talk about the dreams (code name for protests) that we hit a dog (police) the other day, we threw a petrol bomb the other day, or that I was in PolyU … (…). You cannot tell others that you were involved or

did something illegal. We cannot express our feeling or emotion freely because this is unspeakable.

Among almost all the interviewees, we also find the gain of objective political competence, in the sense that the protests triggered a search for knowledge about law, international politics or history. Although, for the actors with higher cultural capital, the events confirmed their previous critical views on the "one country, two systems" regime. The rest of them started to look for information about their political system in international news, books, articles, social media, or online lectures of critical scholars. For instance, a wo-lei-fei housewife explained how much she had learned in different areas. On a practical level, watching online tutorials and talking with young protestors in demonstrations about how to use Telegram or glue a poster on a wall using an adhesive spray. And, on a theoretical level:

> In this movement, I have learnt a lot; wow! No matter it's about sociology, politics, law, or how to use certain tools, I have learnt many things. I didn't know how to use Telegram before… I understand Hong Kong more now (…). I look it up on the government website and read about the extradition bill; I can't just trust the info I read on social media or Telegram. I now read books and attend seminars and online webinars about politics,

history, and the social movement. I would try to receive as much information; then, I could do my own analysis and decide what I want to do.

The acquisition of new knowledge, combined with the direct experiences of the protests, contributed to radicalising the actors' opinions or, more concretely, transforming their vague liberal values into more elaborated abstract constructions. In that sense, what they learnt did not contradict their previous opinions and attitudes but consolidated and deepened them. Some of the actors admitted that after the Anti-ELAB movement, they started to support the idea of the independence of Hong Kong, but at the same time, they considered it impossible.

I didn't trust the political system so much in the past, but I trusted the judicial system more. However, recently, there has been such a big discrepancy between the judgement of different cases. There is no reciprocity. In that way, you could feel that the court is just a tool of the political regime. So now, my trust in the judicial system is rather low. (…) My political stance used to be closer to the left, like "universal love", but now I tend to be a right-winger; I care about the concept of Hong Kong more (…). Like Hong Kong independence, I used to reject this idea. But now, I think it is something that should

happen. The whole movement is to demand sovereign rights; to claim a sovereign right, you will need to become a country… Basic Law would never give us this right. As long as China holds sovereignty, every single word in Basic Law is rubbish.

The acceptance of violence is also an obvious consequence of the exposure to the 2019 protests, as explained earlier. The actors openly recognise the legitimacy of using violence, by themselves or others, against the police or public goods to achieve political means.

In history, only if you win you have a say. In our camp, we have casualties and deaths. However, the deaths have become just an urban myth. If we don't do something more aggressive to break through this situation, the situation will only worsen… Your opposition is doing something to show that whoever is walking on the corpses of the others is winning, so we need someone cruel enough to walk on their corpses.

The radicalisation of anti-Chinese attitudes is also a notorious example of the change of views. Some actors adopted a culturalist or xenophobic approach when discussing China and its political system. Their anger and frustration reinforced their Hong Kong identity, perceived in opposition

to the Chinese identity as if the values they imply were incompatible. One of the wo-lei-fei we interviewed used to consider himself a "leftard of Greater China", but after the summer of 2019, he no longer identified himself with this label. This derogatory expression refers to the individuals who recognise themselves culturally and ethnically as Chinese and simultaneously criticise the authoritarian rule of the Communist Party. The wo-lei-fei explained his change of attitude with bitterness:

> The values of the mainland people are hardly acceptable. For example, studying and passing exams, once I had a few mainland students who think as long as they achieve certain marks, whether they cheated or plagiarised, it's unimportant. The most important thing is that they don't get caught. They know what they do is unfair to their classmate, but they don't care. What I see as the value of modern Chinese people, I don't identify with that at all.

Also, a yung-mo, freshly graduated from high school and son of mainland emigrants, when asked if he thinks the movement is making history, he answered with conviction:

> Absolutely. Before this, the nationality of Hong Kong was an idea of a minority. However, since last year, liberating Hong Kong for Hong Kong independence, it's becoming a stronger idea now. I used to call myself Hong Kong-Chinese, but now I reckon myself as a complete Hongkonger, but not Chinese. (…) Slowly I started to understand that many problems in Hong Kong are because of the Chinese communists… understand that we have our own culture.

The radicalisation experienced by the actors also included learning strategies to avoid police repression. As explained, the lessons from the defeat of the 2014 Umbrella Movement contributed to shaping a leaderless repertoire of contention characterised by the "be water" motto. The protestors established a comradery, both online and offline, without knowing the real identities of the other sau-zuk (comrades). As related above, we found several support activities to coordinate the street protestors. Also, the protestors participated in countless Telegram open groups and channels to promote the "yellow economy" (conscious consumption), such as grocery shops and restaurants and health care assistance. Likewise, some young protestors explained how they did not reveal their identity to the "teammates" of the small frontline groups they met previously in the protests or the Lennon Walls of their neighbourhoods and with whom they coordinate using encrypted apps. We can also include in these interactions the expression, during the pandemic, through anonymous social

media posts of unspeakable feelings and thoughts at home.

These anonymous interactions seem to nuance the onsite observations of the 2010s wave of contention in which the intense socialisation among ordinary citizens and activists in an occupied public space was considered an explanatory factor of the intense and highly emotional identification of the actors with the movement (Bennani-Chraïbi and Fillieule, 2012, p. 23; Goujon and Shukan, 2012, p. 11; Serrano-Moreno, 2012, p. 77). However, these interactions were unstable and sporadic in the Hong Kong case. After the National Security Law was enacted on 30 July 2020, most first-time activists lost these online networks to avoid repression.

Conclusion

A few factors explain why so many ordinary citizens participated for the first time in a collective action between April 2019 to January 2020. First, actors appropriated identities, such as yung-mo, wo-lei-fei and sau-zuk, objectivised online and offline in uncountable ways. Second, the mobilisation of sophisticated resources due to the protestors' high cultural capital surpassed the destabilising effects of conventional political resources, which motivated them to continue protesting. Third, the public's support and intergenerational solidarity reinforced the transversality of the movement.

The combination of these factors explains how ordinary citizens felt they were becoming "revolutionaries", triggering a radicalisation of their political attitudes and a fast-learning process of repertoires of contentious politics. Also, the protestors' liberal values allowed them to identify the contradictions of the political system. This predisposition represented a crucial motivation to join the protests, triggering an intense politicisation through direct experiences and intellectual development. We believe that these experiences have changed the actors' political views durably even if the movement had ceased to act in Hong Kong. Therefore, we can argue that the Anti-ELAB movement was mainly driven by radicalised middle-class actors who tried unsuccessfully to resist the progressive introduction in the region of the socialist rule of law with Chinese characteristics.

Later, the Anti-ELAB movement was interrupted by the covid 19 pandemic and the lockdown initiated on January 2020. With the end of street politics, the movement continued to act online, and the most prominent pro-democracy leaders started to leave the region to avoid being persecuted and concentrated their efforts on lobbying Western governments (Serrano-Moreno and Osorio, 2023). The adoption of the National Security Law on 30 June 2020 deepened this tendance with the dissolution of most of the pro-democracy political

parties and organisations and the departure to Western countries, not just of public figures but also young protestors who risked being condemned to jail for committing rebellion, subversion or collusion with foreign powers. Not surprisingly, since 2020, emigration has increased dramatically, especially among the younger generation who experienced political socialisation in the last decade and had tertiary education. Media have reported that between 2020 and 2022, around 150.000 Hongkongers (2% of the region's total population) have left the region, and more are expected to do so thanks to the special visa schemes offered by the United Kingdom, Australia and Canada (Lok-kei, 2022). Indeed, some Hongkoners decided to move abroad to avoid repression due to their engagement in the Anti-ELAB movement, but many others decided to leave Hong Kong to live in a country that offers a democratic environment like the one they were used to. However, whether the pro-democracy and human rights organisations of overseas Hongkoners will manage to lobby Western democracies and become relevant actors in an international scenario marked by the China-United States rivalry remains open.

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