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Youth-Led Social Identity and Movements: A Case Study of Youth Activism in Hong Kong

Emily Mei



Abstract: This paper explores the forces which spark youth activity in global social movements with a focus on Hong Kong youth as a case study. The three factors which propel youth activism—youth social identity, youth's desire to be heard, and a rise in online activism—are present in historic and contemporary social movements globally. The same factors are also present in youth-led Hong Kong's pro-democracy movement. In response to China's authoritarian political agenda, Hong Kong youth have solidified their identity as Hong Kongers rather than Chinese. Through public displays of opposition, they have ensured that their voices are acknowledged by adults. Moreover, with social media, youth have mobilized each other exponentially furthering the movement's efforts. The more that China attempts to exert their control over Hong Kong, the stronger the youth continue to resist.

Keywords: Youth Activism, Social Movements, Youth Social Identity, Hong Kong, Hong Kong Youth

1. Introduction

Youth, both historically and contemporarily, have been the driving force behind many global social movements. Youth in western democracies have become acclimated to protests (Meyers & Tarrow 1998). Dalton (2009) notes that young people participate in political protests because it is the only outlet to voice their opinions in comparison to formal procedures such as voting. Thus, as youth become more politically conscious, their political awareness translates into greater social movement participation (Gordon 2008).

Globally, youth are driven to social activism by three factors: social identity, desire to be heard, and increased online activism. Youth derive their social identity from their group membership and upon external threat, their identity becomes politically strengthened, such as in the 2010 Arab Spring protests. Furthermore, they are drawn to political action because of their desire to be properly recognized in political settings. If not, youth will find unique methods to express their voices such as in the 1976 Soweto Uprising. Moreover, a rise online activism through social media has strongly influenced youth to become more politically engaged and aware, as shown in the timely #BlackLivesMatter movement.

Using a case study analysis, I find that three key aspects of youth activism in global social movements are also present in Hong Kong's pro-democracy movement. The case of youth activism in Hong Kong is unique among social movements because the young generation are leading the fight against China. In the 2003 Anti-Article 23 protests, Hong Kong youth held their first large-scale protest and began solidifying their social identity as Hong Kongese as opposed to Chinese. In the 2012 National Education protests, students led an occupation movement to publicly vocalize their stance on a new education curriculum. In the 2014 Umbrella Movement and 2019 Extradition Bill protests, young people utilized social media as an avenue for activism, which played monumental roles in further growing the movement across Hong Kong. My study aims to contribute to existing scholarly understanding of youth activism

in global social movements with a specific focus on the youth leading the Hong Kong social movement.

2. Hong Kong's Political History

Hong Kong first became a British colony in 1842 and has since developed socioeconomically distinct from China. The territory of modern-day Hong Kong ceded to Britain in three separate expansions. The first two expansions, Hong Kong Island in 1842 and Kowloon Peninsula in 1860, were done so in perpetuity. Hong Kong's third expansion, the New Territories in 1898, was leased to the British for 99 years to serve as a military buffer zone. 99 years was chosen because it is the longest possible lease term for property under common law (Chen 2020). Sir Claude MacDonald, the British diplomat who negotiated the lease, later stated that he thought 99 years was "as good as forever", signifying he had no intention of returning the New Territories (Preston 2000). Hong Kong remained a British colony for 156 years, and under British reign, Hong Kongers enjoyed special political freedoms that were absent in Imperial China, such as freedom of speech, press, and assembly. Hong Kong flourished as an international trade hub with few government regulations and became the freest economy in the world, while China underwent a communist revolution (Chan 2011).

However, as the end of the 99 year lease was approaching, Britain and the People's Republic of China began to negotiate the future of Hong Kong. Due to technicalities within the treaties, Britain was only required to return the New Territories. Theoretically, Britain could still maintain sovereignty over Hong Kong Island and Kowloon Peninsula. But, during discussions, Britain realized that it would be impractical to separate the New Territories from the rest of the colony due to the mass amount of new development on the third expansion (Akers-Jones 2004). Thus, the British administration concluded that it would return the entirety of Hong Kong back to China. Margaret Thatcher, then Prime Minister of Britain, defended Britain's decision by claiming that the alternative was

no agreement at all. China was adamant about retrieving the territory and would not extend the lease for the New Territories (Ma 1997).

The Sino-British Joint Agreement, a treaty between Britain and China that outlined the sovereignty of Hong Kong, was signed on December 19, 1984. Despite losing Hong Kong as a colony, Britain was insistent that Hong Kong would be able to maintain their fundamental political liberties and capitalist economy. Thus, a compromise, “One Country, Two Systems”, was reached in which Hong Kong would maintain a high level of autonomy for 50 years as a buffer period to adjust to Chinese rule (Ma 1997). The guarantee of Hong Kong’s freedom was to be drafted in Hong Kong’s Basic Law, the region’s mini-constitution. The Handover occurred on July 1, 1997 and exactly at midnight, more than 4,000 troops from China’s People’s Liberation Army crossed the border in Hong Kong (Mufson 1997). China’s act was a display of China’s eagerness to exert its influence and control over Hong Kong, which has only grown more apparent as 2047 approaches. Since the Handover, the Hong Kong youth have been at the forefront of the protests vocalizing their opposition to China’s political encroachment.

3. Youth Social Identity

Every social movement can be reduced to the sole concept of an inclusive group identifying against an exclusive group as “us vs them.” Both historically and contemporarily, youth activity in social movements can be explained by Henri Tajfel’s social identity theory, which states that individuals derive their identity and sense of self from membership within a particular social group, such as nationality or age (Tajfel et al. 1971). Groups give their members a sense of belonging in society, and these group identifications play vital roles in how youth view themselves in relation to their environment.

Through group membership, youth formulate a collective identity through their shared struggles of solidifying their identity and common community needs (Gregory & Miller 1998). While collective iden-

tity generally refers to a person's sense of belonging to a group, in the context of social movements, collective identity refers to the shared sense of we-ness derived from shared beliefs and emotions among a group pursuing social and political change. Hence, when a youth's group affiliation is threatened by external sources, like the government, their social identity becomes more politically significant. These threats influence young people's political behavior in both formal institutions and non-traditional settings, because their individual identity is inherently tied to their group's. When their identity is threatened, youth will respond with an attempt to elevate their group's status and self-image (Chan et al. 2020).

For example, during the 2010 Arab Spring protests, youth across the Arab region led a series of protests against their respective governments in response to a state failure of providing social opportunities. They were unable to access opportunities promised to them in adulthood, such as quality education, viable employment, marriage, and family formation (Mulderig 2013). Arab youth shared the group identity of "waithood", described by Diane Singerman (2007), when their identity as emerging adults is threatened by the government's inability to provide them with the necessary tools to properly transition into adulthood (Honwana 2014).

4. Hong Kong's Youth Social Identity

In 2003, six years after the Handover, China launched its first attempt at political control over Hong Kong. Specifically, China sought to implement a national security law that Hong Kongers perceived as a threat to their freedom of speech (Cheng 2005). Article 23 of Hong Kong's Basic Law essentially prohibited any act that threatened the security of the Chinese government, including speaking out against their authoritarian regime.

In response, known as the Anti-Article 23 protests, 500,000 Hong Kong citizens protested against the proposed security law on July 1, 2003 (Ma 2015). After the large-scale public demonstrations, James Tien, a

member of the Executive Council who would vote on the legislation, resigned. Without the necessary votes to pass the law, it was postponed indefinitely (Lee & Chan 2008). The protest's success was viewed as a point of political awakening of collective identity among Hong Kongers, particularly among youth who grew up with certain freedoms under British rule that were threatened by China.

Known as the "July 1st Effect", Hong Kong's first major protest against China became the spark of the pro-democracy movement. Prior to 2003, Lee and Chan (2008) note that Hong Kong youth were mostly politically apathetic, preferring social and economic stability over political development. However, after July 1, Hong Kongers were no longer merely political bystanders. In November 2003, the "July 1st effect" was evident when many pro-democracy candidates won district council elections (Cheng 2004). Furthermore, on January 1, 2004, 100,000 citizens took to the streets to call for democratic reform. And between 2005 and 2006, there were three other pro-democracy demonstrations with participants ranging from 20,000 to 100,000 (Ma 2015).

Charles Tilly (2004) defines a movement as a "campaign where collective actors make collective claims on target authorities by an array of public performances which represent the cause's worthiness." The Hong Kong citizens were the collective actors, gathered to make a collective claim against China through a public protest to showcase their opposition to the national security law. Its subsequent success began a domino effect and a wave of political empowerment across Hong Kong. In Chan and Lee's 2005 study, they found that many 2003 youth protesters reported feeling politically empowered after the event. Cathy, a protest participant, stated, "Wow, I'm really powerful [...] So we the people actually have power." Since their displays of opposition were successful enough to slow China's political agenda, the youth realized that their voice was powerful enough to make tangible change.

To further corroborate the "July 1st Effect", in the past two decades, there has been a surge in Hong Kong collective identity. In the first half of 2003, the University of Hong Kong reported that 32.6% of Hong

Kong citizens self-identified as Hongkongers whereas 30.4% identified as Chinese. 2009 was the twentieth anniversary of China's Tiananmen Square Massacre, a student-led political demonstration against China's one-party system where China's military shot the protesters. In that year, there was a distinct spike in Hong Kong identity. In the latter half of 2009, the University of Hong Kong also reported that 37.6% identified with Hong Kong, a 4% increase from 2003, and 24.2% identified as Chinese, a 6.2% decrease from 2003 (Ping & Kin-Ming, 2014). The twentieth anniversary allowed Hong Kongers born after 1989 to understand the full gravity of the massacre, which furthered their identification against China (Veg 2017).

The protest turned China's policies from non-intervention to pro-action in which China decided to take a more hands-on approach towards Hong Kong. However, the more Hong Kong felt threatened by China, the stronger the resistance against China grew. Ma (2015) also notes, "Beijing was and is the chief and ultimate obstacle for Hong Kong's democratization." Connecting it with Tajfel's social identity theory, Hong Kong youth formed their Hong Kong identity by identifying against China. For protesters, being Hong Kongers means having the political freedom and prized ability to have a voice in their society. Similar to Arab Spring, the young generation was driven to protect their identity as Hong Kongers when facing the threat from the Chinese government. The 2003 protests triggered their identification with Hong Kong which over time fueled the growth of their social movement.

5. Youth Political Socialization

Youth are driven to mobilize politically due to their desires to be recognized in adult-dominated spaces. As adolescent members of society, young people are often treated as if they cannot properly engage in politics, which creates barriers for engagement and political socialization (Gordon 2017). Political socialization is defined as how people learn to engage in politics through acquiring knowledge and beliefs which shape

their political stances (Glasberg & Shannon 2010; Lee et al 2013). Youth are not politicized through their families or institutions, but instead develop their own political socialization through individual experiences and opinions.

Oftentimes, adolescents find adult-dominated activist spaces too dismissive of their concerns (O'Donoghue & Strobel 2007). For example, Social Movement Organizations (SMO's) do little to invite youth participation throughout their websites (Elliot & Earl 2019). Thus, these pressures force young people to create their own spaces to engage politically, utilize their voice, and mobilize their peers. Rather than waiting for adults to create political opportunities and spaces for them, the younger generation embraces the initiative. Recent literature has argued that young people are political agents of social change and refute the belief that they are "citizens in the making" who only become engaged political actors at adulthood (Gordon 2008). Youth activity continually reframes democracy not as an exclusively adult space, but an ongoing process between generations of adults and youth.

In June 1976, 20,000 students in Soweto, South Africa staged a peaceful march protesting laws requiring schools to teach in Afrikaans, the language of their white oppressors, as opposed to English (Kirshner 2015). Later known as the Soweto Uprising, the students were driven by their desires to be heard after years of unsuccessful negotiations against the law. During those years, they suffered language switches from English and Afrikaans, loss of academic retention, and deprivation of policy discussions (Aycard 2010). Through their experience with the Afrikaans law, the youth of Soweto, the city most directly impacted by the law, were politically socialized due to direct legal impact, although only the adults were making the decisions. In such an adult-dominated space, the youth of Soweto created their own space to protest.

6. Hong Kong Youth Political Socialization

The youth of Hong Kong are the first generation to be born under

One Country, Two Systems and thus, have the most at stake regarding Hong Kong's future. While the 2003 protests ignited a spark of political socialization in Hong Kong, student activism was not prominently impactful until 2012 (Chung 2016). In response to the Anti-Article 23 protests, China was motivated to implement "Moral and National Education" (hereafter 'National Education'), a new educational system for primary and secondary schools; the curriculum aimed to build Chinese nationalism and allegiance among Hong Kong youth, as many refused to identify as Chinese (Ma 2015).

However, in Hong Kong, National Education was perceived as brainwashing. The watershed moment for this movement occurred when the press released material from the curriculum that described the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as a "progressive, selfless, and unified ruling group" (Ma 2015). The fallacy of the quote affirmed the suspicions of brainwashing and provided ammunition for the 2012 Anti-National Education movement.

Similar to the Soweto Uprising, Hong Kong youth demanded to be acknowledged in political discussions surrounding their education policy. In 2012, Joshua Wong, a 14-year-old student, founded Scholarism, a pro-democracy student activist organization that defended Hong Kong's education policy from China's influence. The organization was created without direct involvement of any political party but that was not the root of their motivation. Instead, they were driven by their desire to be politically heard as students. A Scholarism leader stated, "There was no need for a political affiliation to become a part of the democratic movement. It awakened a generation" (Veg 2017). The young generation was focused on protecting Hong Kong's autonomy and was politically socialized to action through their personal fears of the curriculum and its impact on their future. They did not make it a partisan issue but instead focused on exercising their right to vocalize their political stances.

In March 2012, Joshua met with C.Y. Leung, Hong Kong's Chief Executive, on behalf of Scholarism to directly voice his opposition to National Education. As a youth in an adult-dominated space, Joshua passio-

nately expressed the students' perspective on National Education, "You may find it odd that students show up at an event like this [...] We demand that the government withdraw National Education and the brainwashing curriculum" (Piscatella, 2017). However, he stated afterward that "C.Y. Leung was not interested to what I say about National Education" (Piscatella 2017). The negligence of the adults towards the youth motivated them to take their own initiative to influence the political circumstances surrounding their education. Thus, they created their own space to be publicly heard.

On August 30, 2012, four days before the implementation of National Education, the student activists of Scholarism occupied Civic Square, the public space outside Hong Kong's government headquarters. Their strategic location ensured that their presence would not be ignored and they intended to stay until the government withdrew National Education. On the eighth evening of the occupation, September 7, 2012, 120,000 people arrived in Civic Square to protest the curriculum (Cheng 2016). The following day, C.Y. Leung announced National Education was no longer mandatory and the decision to implement the curriculum was left to the individual schools (Wang 2017).

Hong Kong youth were driven to political activity due to their motive to be recognized by adults in the governmental sphere. China attempted to politicize the Hong Kong youth through formal education, but the students rose to resist it. Joshua Wong and Scholarism were motivated by their desire to obtain a voice in the discussion of their education and future, not by political gain. Their actions triggered a wave of political empowerment among Hong Kong youth that continued to grow exponentially and gain global attention.

7. Youth Online Activism

Youth hold the power to shape their methods of engaging in community activism and political participation. Through social media,

youth become easily exposed to politics through channels they are already familiar with, which has heightened political agency through online activism. Because online activism is not guided through formal institutions or elites, it allows the young generation to freely exert their own voice and influence over issues (Cohen & Kahne 2011). They are able to directly connect with other activists, build relationships to capitalize their voice, and share their experiences to contribute to the movement through social media.

Social media has become an indispensable tool for contemporary social movements. Movements that use social media platforms have frequently been larger and have scaled up more quickly (Mundt et al 2018). The utilization of hashtag activism, a discursive form of protest on social media united through a hashtagged word, has made it convenient for young people to engage in politics (Yang 2016). Nearly every social media platform utilizes hashtags as a way to categorize and publicize content. Social media allows users to actively engage and shape the discussion, which offers young people the opportunity to contest common political ideologies.

In the #BlackLivesMatters (BLM) movement, social media has become a critical tool in facilitating youth activity. The movement's well-known hashtag, #BlackLivesMatter, was first used in July 2013 on Facebook following the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the death of Trayvon Martin (Anderson 2016). Since then, young people have utilized online hashtag activism to strengthen the movement and highlight how Black people are disproportionately impacted by police violence. A 2020 Pew Research study shows that the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag has been used roughly 47.8 million times on Twitter, accounting to an average of roughly 3.7 million times per day (Anderson et al 2020). Through hashtags, youth possess the capacity to directly share their stories in a way that is recognized by the public and encourages audience participation through liking, commenting, or sharing the content.

8. Hong Kong Youth's Online Activism

Following the 2012 Anti-National Education movement, Hong Kong's youth activism, particularly their online activism, further developed and played a vital role in the 2014 Umbrella Movement. A key difference between Hong Kong and China is that Hong Kong enjoys uncensored internet access and freedom of speech, while China's internet is under government censorship (Chen et al 2016). Therefore, social media became an essential tool in facilitating political participation opportunities for youth within Hong Kong's pro-democracy movement.

In the Umbrella Movement, Hong Kongers fought for electoral reform and the ability to directly vote for their Chief Executive. Article 45 in Hong Kong's Basic Law decrees that the Chief Executive will eventually be chosen by universal suffrage. However, in 2014, Beijing announced they would allow Hong Kongers to vote freely, but only from their pool of pre-approved candidates, an act many Hong Kongers referred to as a "fake democracy" (Chan 2015). To showcase their resistance against China once again, Hong Kong citizens held a 79-day occupation protest on Hong Kong's main streets within the major districts, like Admiralty, the heart of Hong Kong's central business district, and Mong Kok, a densely populated working-class area. According to two university polls, 1.3-1.45 million people participated in the movement and 53.5% of them were youth between 18-29 (Cheng 2016).

The Umbrella Movement allowed the younger generation to explore a new way of activism through social media. In particular, the turning point of the youth mobilization came when a photo of police releasing tear gas on crowds of protesters went viral. Upset by the violent response to the peaceful protests, many Hong Kongers were immediately driven to join the movement. Cheng (2016) notes that after the widespread of the image, one third of the protesters reported they were motivated to join the occupation protest by deep-rooted factors of Hong Kong's politics and seeing direct resistance from youth protesters. As the numbers of protesters grew, the police became more violent to attempt to control

the masses, which in turn angered and attracted more protesters (Agur & Frisch 2019).

Social media was the key to mobilize youth to participate in protests which intensified the impact of the Umbrella Movement. During the 79-day protest, WhatsApp and Facebook were the main social media platforms and became fundamental to the movement (Wang 2017). WhatsApp was used to share information among personal social networks. Ordinary citizens could directly participate in the protests through their own devices by creating and distributing their personal narratives. Meanwhile, Facebook was used for widespread posts (e.g. public statements and event announcements). A Scholarism member stated, “Facebook is the biggest treasure of Scholarism, for publicity, recruitment, communication, and interaction” (Wang 2017). For organizers, the widespread use of social media means it is no longer necessary for them to physically distribute movement props such as flyers. By posting an image, like one depicting police brutality, student leaders were able to reach out to movement members and raise public attention to the protests and their causes.

The 2019 Extradition Bill protests can be seen as an extension of the 2014 Umbrella Movement. In 2019, Hong Kongers staged their largest protest to date against an extradition bill that could allow them to be charged with a crime in Hong Kong but tried under China’s judicial system. Unlike the #BlackLivesMatter movement which utilized hashtags, Hong Kong protesters utilized a different form of online activism: slogans. The use of slogans promotes the idea of collective struggle and identity within a social movement (Ginwright 2007). Their slogan Five Demands, Not One Less became central to organizing the young protesters under five collective objectives. Organizers learned from the 2014 Umbrella Movement the necessity of unifying citizens under a single and widely accepted goal (Lee et al 2015). Thus, in 2019, Hong Kong youth were able to facilitate large-scale mobilization and nurture an overall sense of community among protesters with their slogans chanted in mass crowds and plastered throughout social media.

The widespread usage of social media led to the subsequent rise

of participatory politics from Hong Kong youth. 93.8% of Extradition Bill protesters said they used online media as a source of information. Out of all the respondents, 11.8% were aged 19 and under and 49% were aged 20-29 (Lee et al 2020). In November 2019, Hong Kong had its highest voter turnout of 71% and the majority of the voters was youth. During that election cycle, pro-democracy candidates won 85% of district council seats (Ku 2020). Such active participation from the younger generation in both protests and online discussion suggests strong motivation and willingness of civic participation. Furthermore, it displays the extent to which youth influence institutional politics. At every notable Hong Kong protest, the young people are at the forefront, pushing back against China's attempts at control and fighting for a democratic future.

9. Conclusion

Youth have historically and contemporarily been at the frontlines of social movements due to three primary reasons. First, young people are driven to political activity when their collective social identity is threatened. In the 2010 Arab Spring movement, young people protested against their government's inability to provide a transition into adulthood which threatened their collective identity as youth. Secondly, youth are driven to utilize their voice in order to be acknowledged in adult-dominated spaces. In the 1976 Soweto Uprising, South African youth peacefully showcased their resistance to an Afrikaans language policy after their adult representatives failed to effectively petition it. Lastly, due to the rise in online activism, the young generation have greater exposure to politics through social media, resulting in higher youth political engagement. In the ongoing #BlackLivesMatter movement, social media has been fundamental to the growth and scaling of the movement's mission.

My research suggests that the factors which drive youth activism in global social movements also apply to Hong Kong's youth. In the 2003 Anti-Article 23 protests, the Hong Kong youth took their first major political stance against China who fueled the growth of an exclusive Hong

Kong identity. In the 2012 protests, their activism fully emerged when China proposed National Education. They staged a public occupation protest to ensure their voices were heard. Moreover, in the 2014 Umbrella Movement, the youth utilized social media to call for electoral reform and encouraged outsiders to join protest efforts. Online activism was further built upon in the 2019 Extradition Bill protests through the use of slogans which encouraged youth to engage in institutional politics such as supporting pro-democracy candidates.

In June 2020, China passed a national security law in Hong Kong, which was the same national security law that Hong Kongers protested against in 2003. Following the implementation of this law in November, Beijing disqualified four pro-democracy legislators on the grounds of violating “national security” because they refused to acknowledge China’s sovereignty over the region (Ramzy et al 2020). The following month, Joshua Wong and two other prominent pro-democracy leaders were sentenced to prison for their organizational role in the 2019 protests (Ramzy & May 2020). While the charges were first made in 2019, many Hong Kongers view their arrest as a result of the national security law which has since changed the way of life in Hong Kong.

As the end of Hong Kong’s semi-autonomy in 2047 draws closer, Beijing has continued to intensify their approaches to control Hong Kong and silence the voice of its citizens, especially its youth. As Hong Kong youth continue to fight to protect their autonomy and democratic rights, the movement will evolve with them. Future studies can examine the ever-changing impacts of the social movement of youth leaders and how the movement may develop over time. Hong Kong will continue to resist China’s political advancements and fight until the very end.

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