

Between Ritualistic Protest and Perpetual Struggle: Transformation of Activism in Postcolonial Hong Kong

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This paper considers the challenges towards a pseudo-democracy when its activism has shifted in scale and escalated in performance. In recent years, Hong Kong has experienced an increasingly radical contention that aims not only to resist the policy of particular administrations but also to defy the legitimacy of the regime. This paper first reveals the historical-institutional foundations for a cycle of ritualistic protest in the city-state. Based on event data, ethnographic accounts, and interviews, the paper then examines the changes in the scale, interval, and performance of salient contentious events between 2005 and 2014. The study further seeks to explain how and why spontaneous, unorganised, and radical field actions have since then been standardised, invalidating the dominant strategies of state and social actors. We argue that this wave of activism, through the interplay of vanguard and rearguard actions and the bricolage of protest history, has expanded the object of contention and attracted the widest possible constituency towards perpetual struggle. In this context, voicing opinions is not only a means to defend one's values or advance one's claims but also an end in itself.

Keywords: civil society, contentious politics, political transition, field strategy, Hong Kong

Introduction

On 1 July 2003, more than half a million Hong Kong citizens marched on the streets to protest against a proposed national security law and to demand political change. Because of this unprecedented public outcry, several ministers resigned, the city's chief executive was eventually forced to follow, and the bill, widely considered a pledge of allegiance to the new sovereign, was dropped and has never been re-proposed. The date on which the sovereignty of the former British colony was returned to China, 1 July, has since been defined by grassroots activities rather than

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orthodox ceremonies. The government finds it difficult to monopolise the occasion to promote its achievements or to use it to foster patriotism. Rather, the limelight now falls on the number of protesters, their appeal, and their performance.

Contention has intensified and changed in form since 2003. Concerns over universal suffrage, the environment, cultural heritage, the rural community, national education, minority rights, and public broadcasting have provoked a wave of political activism. The contention has been spontaneous and unorganised, yet perpetual and popular. The government has not been able to predict the scale and fulfil the demands of the new activism, and political parties and established civil society organisations have been unable to initiate or lead the action. Spontaneous mobilisation along multiple issues indicates that this wave of activism aims not only to resist the policies of particular administrations but also to defy the legitimacy of the regime.

What has occurred? Hong Kong has long been regarded as an apathetic society in which contention is absorbed or remains latent despite its socio-economic progress. The majority of Hong Kongers who were victims of communist political campaigns are said to have a refugee mentality that treasures stability and resents contention (Lau and Kuan, 1988). A synarchy between the Chinese elite and colonial bureaucracy is said to have been established through the administrative absorption of politics, relieving potential discontent and ensuring support for government policies (King, 1975). Although the late colonial regime was compelled to empower its civil society to meet the challenges of an affluent society, it concurrently co-opted leading non-governmental organisations (NGOs) by correlating their thrift with state recognition and funding (Lee, 2005; Ma, 2011). Against this backdrop, the quest for political participation was deterred, and civil society has remained collaborative.

The prevalence of contention in postcolonial Hong Kong both challenges the applicability of the theses of apathetic society and consensual politics and raises the question of what types of opportunities or grievances may have mobilised this radical turn. The political-opportunities approach refers to the institutional weaknesses of pseudo-democracy. Some suggest that the decline of party politics has motivated other unconventional means of aggregating and articulating the interests between the ruler and the ruled (Lau and Kuan, 2002). Others refer to the new regime and its successive administrations' incapacity to promote democratisation, protect freedoms, and resist Beijing's interventions as the causes of public outcry (Cheng, 2005; Sing 2009; Chan and Lee, 2011). The structural-grievances approach explores the extent of

socio-cultural changes in the postcolonial period. Some consider Hong Kong, an increasingly unequal society undergoing recolonisation, to represent a chain in the decolonisation and anti-globalisation movements (Law, 2009; Kuah-Pearce and Guiheux, 2009). Others associate the collective action with the habitus and value of post-industrial society, in which a grand narrative is always questioned, order is negated, and alternative lifestyles are appreciated (Ma, 2011; So, 2011).

These studies provide fruitful surveys and contextual analyses of Hong Kong's multiple transitions after the handover. They establish and consolidate the notions of the pro-democracy social movement and a civil society in self-defence, indicating, respectively, that the struggle for democracy and the encroachments on citizens' existing rights and freedoms are the reasons to voice dissenting opinions and rebel. However, their subject of enquiry determines that the focus is centred on the periodic organised rallies, whereas the characteristics of spontaneous grassroots actions are categorically omitted. The timeframe of their study also neglects the profound changes in appeal and performance during the last decade. Most importantly, such studies do not seriously consider transgressive action as a deviant phenomenon, without which the majority of local issues or isolated concerns would not escalate. Thus, one must extend beyond institutional weakness and organisational advantage to emphasise the process that shapes the course of mobilisation and its discursive construction. This approach demands a comparative, systematic measure of contentious episodes and their recurring mechanisms, which have seldom been considered by transition studies or subverted under the apathetic thesis.

Approach and Method

This paper adopts the interactive approach developed by McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly's seminal work (2001). This approach gives microscopic attention to the repertoire of contention but also accounts for the recurring mechanisms in contentious events. This dynamic orientation attempts to resolve the paradox of studying variations and regularities (McAdam et al. 2008; Aminzade et al., 2002). Contention is by nature complex, varying in terms of actors, appeals, performances, and outcomes, which contributes to the assumption that any meaningful study of it must not deviate from the locality's idiosyncratic history and political culture. However, contention across time and space also shares certain similarities, in which the state is always the ultimate object of contention and by which contentious episodes unfold and interact

with one another.

This paradox endures with the growing academic interest in contentious politics after the Arab Spring and the Occupy Movement. Most of the literature continues to reflect the persistent divisions between structural culturalists and rationalists or between identifying complexities and searching regularities. Some studies emphasise the locally framed yet universal grievances, particularly the entrenched inequality associated with neo-liberalism and the call for participatory democracy (Anderson, 2011; Razsa and Kurnik, 2012). Others refer to the unique yet common opportunities, especially the expanded public space installed by social media and the digital revolution (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012; Juris, 2012).

Hong Kong serves as an ideal case to explore this structural agency puzzle, as it is pseudo-democratic but free, is globalised yet increasingly unequal, and has experienced waves of activism. The interactive approach is appropriate to examine the transformation of Hong Kong's activism over a long duration, diffusing along diverse cleavages and involving multiple actors (Andrews and Biggs, 2006; Rao et al. 2009). Apart from its relevance to Hong Kong's changing state-society relations, this study also encounters two theoretical puzzles. This paper explains how the model of consensual politics or a durable hybrid regime is holistically challenged by the field strategy originating from its grassroots civil society (Diamond, 2012; Slater, 2010). It also assesses why the process to enervate ritualistic protest and invigorate perpetual struggle might feature the very nature of transnational activism and its claim of participatory democracy (cf. Tarrow, 2005; Harvey, 2012).

The study period covers nearly one decade. The period begins in 2005, when contention changed in scale, intensified along old and new cleavages, and was inspired by direct actions during the World Trade Organisation's sixth ministerial conference in Hong Kong. The period ends in 2014, as some salient events are ongoing, providing opportunities for process tracing and data verification. A number of research methods are employed. First, event data are used to examine the shift in the scale and interval of salient events between 2006 and 2014. Only salient events are included because local or isolated issues are frequently absorbed by conventional institutions or demobilised by professional brokers, which creates difficulties in observation. Thus, rather than focusing on all potentially contentious issues, we select only citywide salient events. A salient event is defined as a) involving at least 500 participants, b) lasting for more than one week, c) comprising a range of civil society

organisations, and d) warranting responses from the highest authority or inducing policy changes. These four criteria account for the scale, length, subject, and outcome/object of contention, respectively. The length criterion distinguishes a spontaneous event from a ritualistic protest. The object creation also excludes an industrial action that primarily target at private company.

Second, sixteen semi-structured interviews have been conducted with representative contenders from September 2012 to March 2014. They include initiators or organisers of the salient events, experienced activists and politicians who have either led the ritualistic protests or bridged the salient events to interact with political institutions, and loyal participants of contentious actions. We target individual contenders rather than contentious organisations because the latter have frequently changed their names but not their core members in the post-2005 period.

Third, ethnographic accounts are applied to trace the performance and feedback during salient events. Participant observations have been conducted at four of the five salient events between January 2010 and November 2013. In-depth interviews with the contenders and media footage are used to supplement the account of the omitted Preserving Star Ferry and Queen's Piers event. The process of coordinating performance between civil groups is emphasised as much as the critical junctures for diffusing political parties to interact with political institutions.

In sum, we first explain how the new regime's multiple electorate systems and diverse *demos* have motivated all political parties, both within the informal ruling coalition and from the opposition, along with leading civil society organisations to voice opinions on behalf of their respective contingencies. Protests, although common, have been limited to demonstrations and rallies and were initiated by established and professional actors. We then examine the changes in scale, interval, and performance of five salient events in post-2005 Hong Kong. This examination reveals the emergence of a contingency of spontaneous and radical, yet coordinated, civil disobedience actions in which occupation has become a standard and reinforcing component. This field strategy not only invalidates the state's and the elite's dominant strategies based on the precedent of ritualistic protest but also serves as the prerequisite for a combination of performances and reactions. Hence, politically active citizens perceive voicing opinions not only as a means to defend one's values or to advance one's claims but also as an end in itself. We argue these vigorous actions have become popularised and normalised through the bricolage of protest

history and interplay of the vanguard and rearguard frames, which extend the realm of contention along with its polarisation.

Historical-Institutional Foundations of Ritualistic Protest

With Hong Kong's future decided in the Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984, the late colonial regime began to introduce democratic reforms. Popular elections were introduced in 1982 in the District Boards and extended to the Legislative Council (Legco) in 1988. The Hong Kong Bill of Rights (1991) was incorporated into the legal system to protect human rights, superseding all conflicting laws. The democratic reforms along with the tradition of rule of law have since protected civil liberties and ensured the freedoms of speech and assembly. Hong Kong's citizens are becoming increasingly adapted to forming dissent groups, voicing their discontents, and criticising the government in public without fear of state coercion or retaliation (Wesley-Smith, 2003; Scott, 1989).

The Basic Law, Hong Kong's mini-constitution, constitutes a pseudo-democracy in which the executive and legislative branches are subject to different electoral systems and diverse electorates. The chief executive is elected by an Election Committee, ranging from 800 to 1,200 members, which is formed by a narrow franchise largely consisting of veteran politicians, conglomerates, and professional associations. The Legco is divided into geographical and functional constituencies, in which the popularly elected seats increased from 33 per cent in 1998 to 50 per cent in 2004, and the other half has been allocated to business associations, professional groups, and trade unions. These complex electoral systems have provided the source of executive-legislative deadlock, guaranteeing the pro-establishment majority in the legislature while assuring that the accountability of lawmakers is divided among their diverse electorates.

The Basic Law further prohibits the chief executive from being affiliated with any political parties, which effectively restricts the formation of a formal ruling coalition. To ensure its majority in the Legco, the government must offer selective incentives such as membership in advisory and statutory bodies or public projects to pro-establishment lawmakers or their affiliated organisations (Holiday and Hui, 2007:107). Despite these incentives, the institutional design has motivated the pro-establishment lawmakers to act as if they were the opposition. On ordinary days, these lawmakers organise protests at government headquarters or various bureaus,

visualising and claiming that their efforts are intended to fulfil election promises or prompt policy changes. During critical junctures, as in the 1 July march in 2003 and in the 2004 Legco elections in 2004, these pro-establishment lawmakers defected in the face of popular pressure or electoral calculation. Based on similar logic but on different audience, the opposition or pan-democrats, also considers the periodic mobilisation of the mass to be an effective means of bolstering their bargaining power in the face of a pseudo-democratic regime that is closed to them.

Protected by traditional rights and motivated by institutional incentives, protest *per se* has become an ordinary phenomenon in Hong Kong. As early as 2000, the *Washington Post* labelled Hong Kong as the “city of protest”, implying that the new regime was troubled by rising anxiety and discontent (Chandler, 2000). The Hong Kong Public Order Ordinance, which requires advance notification for any public meeting of more than 50 people or public procession of more than 30 people, has traced the intensity of the issue.¹ Police records show that there have been 51,915 approved applications out of a total of 51,946 applications between July 1997 and September 2012, which amounts to an average of nine protests of that scale each day (Cheung, 2012). According to the Secretary of Security, this type of protest increased from 2,303 events in 2000 to 6,878 events in 2011 (*HKGPR*, 19 December 2012).

Despite the common usage of the term, what a protest includes, excludes, and implies has not been clearly defined. Protest is a broad and often vague concept that can refer to all sorts of transgressive actions. Tarrow (2013) attends to the variety and variation of contentious words, showing how their construction or diffusion can shape the appeal and bound the sequence of activism. The reciprocal relationships between words and forms of contention are also evident in Hong Kong. Before 2005, the meaning of protest in Hong Kong was confined to demonstration (*youxing*) and rally (*jihui*). Demonstrations have been organised by political parties, trade unions, and established NGOs on a daily basis. Although their agendas vary, the number of participants has been steadily limited to one or several dozen people, most of whom are unionists, politicians, and their friends or assistants. To manipulate the strength of protests, temporary demonstrators are sometimes recruited through service agencies and paid by at an hourly or contract rate. Pro-establishment political parties have

¹ This provision had been invalidated by the Bill of Rights in 1995 but was reinstated in an amendment in 1997, which produced a sense of setback and provoked the first wave of civil disobedience actions in the post-handover period.

adopted this practice, partly because their supporters are by nature silent and partly because of their financial capacity (*HKEJ* 19 May 2012; *SCMP* 19 May 2012).

Regardless of the camps, the slogans and strategies used during protests are typically designed and standardised by experienced activists or politicians. This practice indicates the absorption of protest strategy into conventional politics, in which a small group of organised elites articulates and expresses public interests through contentious yet controlled means. This practice also gives the impression that protests are expressive or insincere, contradicting the assumption that protests should be genuine and moral (Jasper, 1997). Certain youth activists and politically active citizens have indeed been troubled by this development and have practised alternative forms of contention, which will be discussed later.

Periodic rallies, although less frequent, are an integrated part of ritualistic protest. The massive and uninterrupted rallies include the 1 July March and the 4 June Memorial, which began in 1989 and 1997, respectively, and have attracted tens to hundreds of thousands of participants each year. The object of contention for the enduring pro-democracy movements is the government, more often the government in Beijing rather than that in Hong Kong. The historic march in 2003 is widely considered a watershed in which more than half a million citizens deliberately resisted a proposed national security measure that was a high priority for Beijing. This critical event demonstrates the capacity of civil society under the fear of communist encroachment (Sing, 2005; Ma, 2007).

However, participation *per se* does not forecast a profound change in the political attitude of citizens. Onsite and focus group surveys have revealed that even the most loyal rally participants habitually undermine their level of activism. Such participants have remained sceptical of contention, affirming their commitment to defending existing rights and freedoms but disapproving of radical actions (Chan and Lee, 2011:174-175). One should also be reminded that the massive rallies in 2003 and 2004 were primarily caused by the accumulation of socioeconomic downturns dating back to the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997. Their mobilisation rapidly crumbled when the chief executive who was considered responsible for the incompetent governance resigned and the local economy improved. In other words, periodic rallies rely on accumulated grievances based on specific targets, which are neither spontaneous nor perpetual.

This cycle of ritualistic protest is vibrant and has served as an acceptable means

for politicians, established NGOs and experienced activists to exert pressure on the regime. This practice effectively combines transgressive action with conventional politics and should be credited for extending the realm of contention along its piecemeal normalisation. However, these daily demonstrations and annual rallies have also become routine, almost exclusively initiated and overseen by professional activists who are part of the political class and hence are too adapted to what is considered right or wrong within local political culture. The stunt of democratisation, despite periodic and ritualistic protests, has thus placed these tactics and their organisers on trial and established a new wave of activism.

Scale Shift and Prolonged Interval

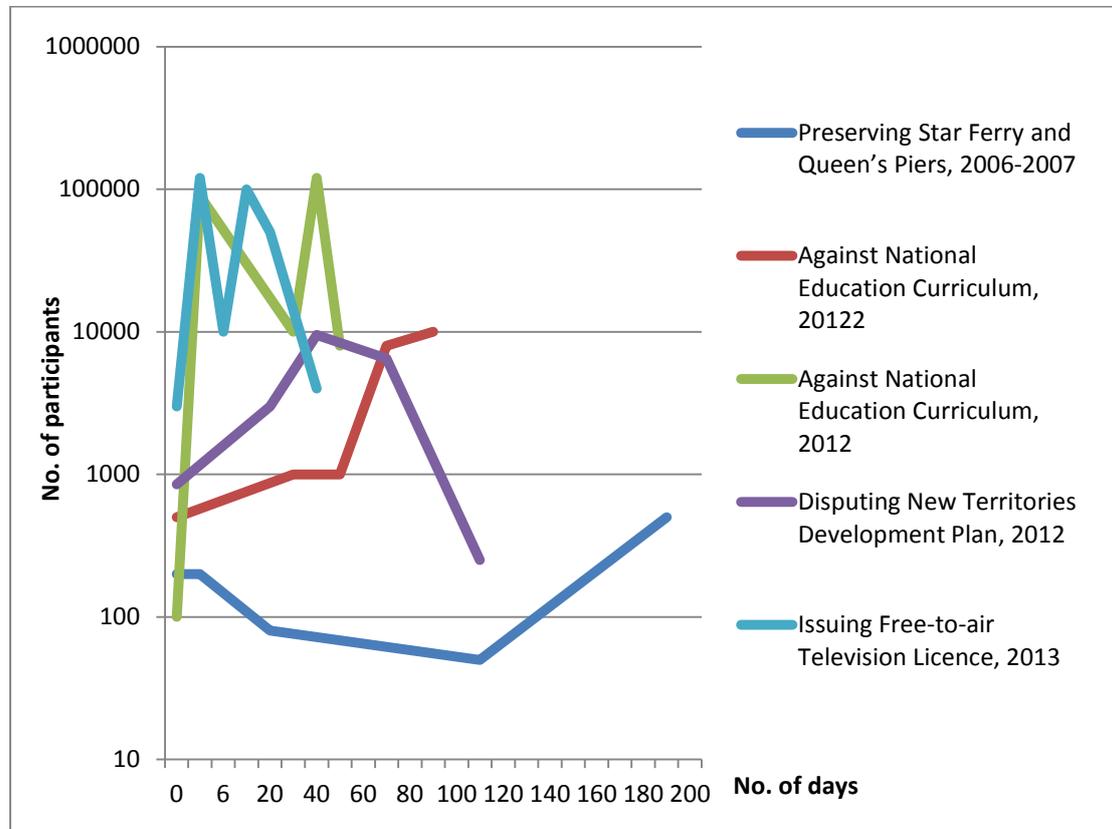
Between 2005 and 2014, a total of five salient events meet the aforementioned criteria: a) involving at least 500 participants, b) lasting for more than one week, c) comprising a range of civil society organisations, and d) warranting responses from the highest authority or inducing policy changes. The events include Preserving Star Ferry and Queen's Piers (Pro-piers) in 2006-2007, Anti-Express Railway Link (Anti-railway) in 2009-2010, Against National Education Curriculum (Anti-curriculum) in 2012, Disputing Northeast New Territories Development Plan (Anti-development) in 2012, and Enlisting Free-to-air Television Licence (Pro-license) in 2013.

Official figures are generally considered more appropriate to standardise variations between events of different natures and between estimates from various organisers. However, the police would release headcounts only during specific episodes of salient events, which hinders comparisons within an event. More importantly, the figures from organisers are always highlighted in the mass and social media, serving as a catalyst for further mobilisation. This constructed reality, which aligns with our dynamic orientation, instead summons the report of the organisers' figures. However, one must be informed that rigorous academic estimations of past events suggest that official figures have underestimated the headcounts by 1/3 to 2/5, whereas the figures from organisers have overestimated the headcounts by 1.5 to 2.6 times (Chan and Lee, 2011:135-139).

A salient event begins when it makes the headlines of at least three newspapers and ends when its principal claims are officially endorsed or infinitely suppressed. This boundary inevitably omits certain traits, such as seminars, documentaries, exhibitions, or derivative works with regard to the salient events, which are excluded

because of their low attendance and non-contentious form and the desire to present a comparable and appropriate time span of analysis.

Figure 1: The Scale and Interval of Salient Events in Hong Kong, 2005-2014



Source: Compiled using data from local newspapers and the Hong Kong Police Force.

Figure 1 shows a shift in the scale of the contentious events, as the number of participants has increased dramatically. The number of participants increased from a maximum of 500 in the Pro-piers event in 2006-2007 to 8,500 in the Anti-railway event in 2009-2010. This pattern indicates that the number of citizens who were mobilised to practise contention had increased by 17 times in approximately two years. The participant number then reached 120,000 in the Anti-curriculum event in 2012 and the Pro-license event in 2013. Those events reflected a further increase of 14 times the scale of participation within another two years. The only exception to the trend was the Anti-development event in 2012, in which the maximum number of protestors declined to 8,500. This decline occurred primarily because the event emerged during the early stage of a policy proposal, in which the threat was not imminent and many conventional procedures were available for disposal.

The absolute numbers are significant but not unprecedented, yet it is the pace and

duration of the events that distinguished this wave of activism. First, the pace of propaganda for initial mobilisation has improved. Compared with past rallies that required months of preparation, including coordinating different NGOs, establishing an agenda, and organising press meetings, post-2005 contention has emerged spontaneously and has taken only weeks or even days to diffuse.

On 17 July 2012, the anti-national education event was initiated by a group of mothers and high school students and eventually attracted 90,000 participants to occupy the government headquarters on the subsequent weekend. On 15 October 2013, a Facebook page was established to contest the government's decision to reject a highly competitive and relatively critical television operator's application for free-to-air television licence. In fewer than 24 hours, the page received more than 450,000 Likes and was ranked number five among all Facebook pages in Hong Kong as of 1 February 2014, only exceeded by entertainment and online shopping pages (Socialbakers, 2014). This form of opinion expression on social media was immediately transformed into collective action, mobilising 120,000 people to occupy the government headquarters three days later.

Second, the interval of contention has been prolonged, illustrating the sustainability of the events. The five events comprise an average of 98 days of active contentious episodes, each involving multiple peaks of mobilisation. The longest event lasted 195 days, the shortest event lasted 44 days, and the smaller events were more sustainable than the larger events.² Compared with a ritualistic protest, in which daily demonstrations typically last for minutes or hours, and annual rallies, which last for one day, these events have massively extended their contentious episodes. This extended length has provided the opportunity for multiple diverse performances, reinforcing the collective efficacy of and political pressure exerted by such events.

The most unique feature is that unorganised individuals rather than professional activists have sustained the long duration of contention. Although political parties always questioned the officials at the Legco and offered professional advice backstage, they were often neither the initiators nor the leaders in the field.³ Rather, the majority of claim makers of these five events have had no affiliations with political parties or

² The Pro-piers event is a deviant case with an exceptionally long duration, as it involved two similar preservation targets in successive periods. If this event is actually considered two events, then the average contentious episode is reduced to 81 days, which indicates a more accurate limit of mobilisation in this period.

³ Interview, Hong Kong, 12 September 2013.

established NGOs. Some of these individuals are members of grassroots networks or online platforms, which had neither the brand nor the resources to attract public support when the events were in motion (Yip, 2010:41; Huang and Xu, 2011:?). Emerging spontaneously and being led by amateurs has become the strength rather than the weakness of this wave of activism. This gives the impression that this wave was genuine and pure, extending its admissible realm to include benches, classrooms, and dining tables, which would hitherto have been considered inappropriate.

Third, the frequency of contention has also escalated. Three of the five salient events were clustered in the last two years of the decade studied. Indeed, their frequency falls substantially behind that of daily demonstrations, but the frequency must be related to the nature of the contention and its cost. The daily demonstrations have involved few people and even fewer physical confrontations with the police. The annual rallies also rightfully earned the label of being peaceful and rational, as the millions of protestors marched for a consecutive 15 years, resulting in only one digital report of assault and not a single case of robbery.

By contrast, the five salient events have changed in form, and the state has responded accordingly. These events frequently involved nonviolent but provoking actions, such as performing sit-ins, hunger strikes, occupation, or siege. The police also adopted a proactive approach to handle such contention, such as increasing its deployment ratio in the field, revising its guidelines on managing physical confrontation, and leading charges on protestors: 45 people were prosecuted under the Public Order Ordinance in 2011 alone, compared with a total of 39 between 1997 and 2010 (Freedom House, 2013; Cheung, 2012). In other words, the appeal to civil disobedience increased the level of resistance along with its cost. Compared with earlier counterparts in the ritualistic protest, the new contenders are more likely and more prepared to experience a crackdown or imprisonment.

Occupation as the Prerequisite Dynamic

Moving from ritualistic protest to perpetual struggle has led to a profound change in the dynamics of contention in Hong Kong. The dominant strategies of different actors, which are based on the analysis of precedent, have become highly inappropriate, if not irrelevant. Past observations suggest that protests, regardless of their popularity, are moderate and periodic and are eventually channelled into conventional institutions. As a result, the following strategies emerge:

- i. For the government, it must wait and let the crowds to disperse, as all protests are eventually containable. Suppression is both costly and unnecessary.
- ii. For the pan-democrats, whose priority is to sustain morale along with the typical ups and downs in the protest cycle, their firm stand on constitutional issues is supplemented by flexible policies on socioeconomic issues.
- iii. For the politically active citizens, their participation matters only if it aligns with conventional politics. Marching out in preset, critical moments is the key.

Of course, these strategies are dominant but not exclusive; thus, actors occasionally deviate from them. However, such strategies constitute a pattern for restraining and ascertaining reactions among the groups. Figure 2 summarises the changes in the field performance, opposition reactions, and state decisions between 2005 and 2014, recoding their complexity but primarily emphasising their recurring mechanisms. In contrast to moderate, periodic, and predictable demonstrations or rallies, these salient events have become radical and sustainable, and they either propose ambitious claims or promote changes in the entire socio-political order.

Figure 2: The Repertoire of Salient Events in Hong Kong, 2005-2014

Event	Field Performance	Opposition Reaction	State Decision
Preserving Star Ferry and Queen's Piers	<i>Occupation</i> Hunger strike Heritage tour	Parliamentary enquiry	Occupants cleared Pier demolished
Anti-Express Rail Link	<i>Siege</i> Prostrating walk Sit-in	Parliamentary enquiry Sub-committee hearing <i>Bipartisan split</i>	Railway budget passed Affected village relocated
Against National Education Curriculum	<i>Occupation</i> Hunger strike Planned student strike	Parliamentary enquiry Subcommittee hearing <i>Bipartisan split</i>	Curriculum retreated
Disputing Northeast Development Plan	<i>Siege</i> Public hearing Bazaar	Parliamentary enquiry Subcommittee hearing <i>Bipartisan split</i>	Development zone minimised
Issuing Free-to-air Television Licence	<i>Occupation</i> Hunger strike Satire	Parliamentary enquiry Subcommittee hearing <i>Bipartisan split</i>	Licence denied

Source: Compiled by crosschecking the headlines of news reports and ethnographic accounts.

The defining feature of the post-2005 contention is its recurring field strategy. Occupation, or sometimes siege, has been transformed into the standard and reinforcing component among the events. This tactic was not altogether precedential in Hong Kong, nor was its potential unanticipated. Similar forms of civil disobedience, such as union strikes, student sit-ins, and even riots, were practised in the late colonial

era and after the handover, arousing public attention or leading to policy changes (Yep, 2007; Lam, 2004). However, the intensity, duration, and combination with other nonviolent performances, along with interactions with social media and political parties, established a chorus of responses.

The reclaiming of public space is central to occupation. This process disrupts the established order by disrupting traffic, everyday life, work patterns, and the very idea of ordinariness. Mitchell (2003) considers public space to be the arena in which to enunciate and enact progressive politics because seizing the space is a means to draw public attention to the entrenched grievances. Harvey (2012:4) expands the term “the right to the city”: “more than individual liberty to access urban resources, it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city”. Several youth activists who initiated the first public record of occupation in the postcolonial period concur with these views:

The idea of reclaiming our public space emerged long time ago. Some local artists had practised before but failed. Strength was a reason and persistence another. On the eve of 26 April 2007, we decided to put the idea into action. A dozen of us then marched into Queen’s Pier, which was already blockaded, waiting to be demolished. The guards attempted to stop us, and the police arrived within a couple of minutes. When we thought that the attempt would end in failure, the police did not intervene but instead secured the parameter.

Different sorts of people then moved into it: not only activists and students, but also writers, architects, and academics. We organised talks, concerts, and hunger strikes and shared our ideas, foods, and camps. We often disagreed, so the voices were plural. But that parameter produced the city’s most visualised public space in the following months; the period was itself monumental.⁴

The activists’ account reveals how unprepared both the state and its coercive force were in handling the vanguard tactic, in which a few active citizens were able to make history. Although the election year was considered the reason that the former chief executive wanted to avoid open confrontation, the initial non-intervention was unlikely to be delivered from that hierarchy. In fact, public support changed substantially from favouring redevelopment to preservation only after the long occupation, not at the beginning of it. A decisive arrest of a dozen lawbreakers occupying a public property would have been tolerated, but the then-clearance of dozens of activists on a perceived monument had almost qualified as a crackdown and had become a public disaster.

Adherence to the traditional wait-and-ignore strategy is therefore a more plausible explanation for the state’s inaction with respect to the historic occupation.

⁴ Interviews, Hong Kong, 13 and 14 December 2013.

However, this let-it-vanish strategy proved fatal, as occupation has diffused into the siege or occupation of the Legco building, the chief executive's residence, and the government headquarters in subsequent events. The use of siege to protest and to coerce public officials and elected representatives to align with the majority view was unprecedented in the city's contemporary history. Even during the high tide of past rallies, this option was not considered. One argument involves the respect towards the office's constitutional symbol rather than the holders of it. Another argument involves the concern that such radical action would contradict the apathetic mentality and become counterproductive.⁵ These calculations or concerns were no longer blinding. Officials and pro-establishment lawmakers had to be escorted out from the government buildings on several occasions. In doing so, the contenders not only disapproved of official policies but also openly discredited the regime. This transformation from consensual disapproval to open contention is often timely, but once completed, it is difficult to reverse. This convergence towards this field strategy also served as the prerequisite for a combination of performances or reactions.

First, distinguished performances that were customised with regard to the themes of each event were allowed to commence. The first two events, whose appeals contradicted the developmental and consensual paradigms, involved an increase in vigorous and interactive tactics. Heritage tours were conducted to spatially and historically monumentalise the pier, which was perceived not only as the landing place for all colonial governors since its construction but also as the arena for massive grassroots movements dating back to the post-war era. Through a prostrating walk imitating Buddhist pilgrims, in which participants held a parcel of rice and kneeled and bowed across five districts, their affection for the land and rural community and their disapproval of the railway construction were visualised. The performances of the three subsequent events were, because of their scale or nature, less dramatic but still expressive. A massive student strike in the secondary schools, which had not occurred for more than three decades, was almost launched in response to a fear of "brainwashing" national education. A bazaar was installed in front of the government headquarters to sell the organic and indigenous products that would be supplanted by the northeast development. Free and open satires were displayed in front of the government headquarters in response to the denial of new television licence.

⁵ Interview, Hong Kong, 15 October 2013.

Citizen journalism, which emphasises the pedestrian view, native accounts, and alternative voice, has also found an arena in which to flourish. A majority of the pioneer occupants at the piers were members of InMedia who used the platform to exchange ideas and coordinate actions. Initially, people sharing similar stands or values were aggregated, which limited the audience at the time. New and more interactive sites, such as the HouseNews and VJMedia, have attracted more writers and readers and further blurred the boundaries between objective observers and passionate participants. In fact, these sites' popular stories and featured analyses have always been clustered in the anti-curriculum and pro-licence events' contentious episodes. These stories facilitated the instant sharing, expressive consumption, or in-depth analysis of the events through interactions with social media and grew along with them. Internet traffic data confirmed that the increase in traffic followed the escalation of respective events. As of 12 March 2014, the most popular media outlet, HouseNews, ranked 95 in Hong Kong and 18,693 globally, rising 7,326 places in three months (Alexa, 2014).

The pan-democrats were equally surprised and constrained by the contentious performances in the field. Figure 2 shows that parliamentary subcommittee hearings and bipartisan splits have become recurring reactions to the salient events. These reactions reveal the intensification that has occurred along with the polarisation of contention, which often contrast with the choices of political leaders. Despite Hong Kong being a city-state, most local or isolated issues in Hong Kong are addressed by grassroots brokers, absorbed into statutory bodies or local councils, and never formed into the subjects of parliamentary enquiry in the Legco. Even when such issues are evoked in council meetings, their audience is primarily the media. Only when the issues enter the subcommittee meeting are they truly addressed. Introducing contentious events into the subcommittee implies that media and public scrutiny will follow. It becomes difficult to adopt a firm stance on constitutional issues, but it is easier to adopt flexible policies on socio-economic issues. Instead, the entire Legco has become another action field. Moderate lawmakers, although in the majority, were hijacked by radical lawmakers who demonstrated their will to fight by initiating confrontations and filibusters. Pro-establishment lawmakers reacted by rebutting the norm in altering subcommittee chairs and in tightening the enforcement of deliberation procedures (e.g. *SCMP*, 16 Oct 2012, 3 Mar 2014; *HKEJ*, 27 Sept 2013).

Two pan-democrats, who have more than two decades of protest experiences, present their dilemma:

We are not entirely anti-national education and against-northeast development. The formers' claim of brainwashing was based upon some texts in a supplementary reference. That brought worries but did not prove a coherent attempt. Besides, some of us were consulted, and our opinions were incorporated into the curriculum and the plan, so criticising them retrospectively when the public opinion had turned is neither professional nor ethical.

We still believe that Hong Kong would not be fully democratised until China is, so knowledge of and integration with China are essential. Yet if we raise any of these concerns in public, it would be political suicide.⁶

This statement implies that the leaders of ritualistic protest are increasingly marginalised. Once they became receivers in the field, there were no decision makers on the benches. When almost any issue—including universal suffrage, the environment, cultural heritage, the rural community, national education, minority rights, and public broadcasting—has the potential to be contentious, the pan-democrats are constrained to detour or to perform backroom deals. Their trust in civil service organisations is also compromised after their defection from the consultative procedure. More significantly, their inability to mediate their supporters is evident. Motivated by grave uncertainty and a weakening mandate, most of them then function as representatives rather than as delegates.

Even the leading NGOs, the core of social institutions, have modified their dominant strategy. These organisations have not turned against the regime directly by joining the salient events; rather, environmental groups, rural councils, and even public universities have initiated protests and signature campaigns to dispute government decisions in the post-2006 period. One reason is that open contention has proved to be an effective means to solicit concessions. On one occasion, the government surrendered by retreating on the national education curriculum. On three occasions, the government compromised, reviewing the heritage policies, relocating the entire affected village to a new space, and minimising the zone dedicated to northeast development.

If we consider beyond immediate outcomes, the records of contention are more evident. First, blessings from social and political institutions could further ensure the passing of public policies. One recurring feature of this wave of activism has been its

⁶ Interviews, Hong Kong, 1 and 2 September 2013.

ability to reverse public opinion. Second, the government has gradually been forced to review its heritage policies, development policies, and integration policies, which are not only economically costly but also politically sensitive (Barber, 2013; Burns et al., 2013). Third, the prolonged occupations over a series of popular issues have inspired and created a more deliberative public sphere. Some questions, which were inevitably dangerous for the regime, have been asked and circulated in the public domain or through social media. In simple terms, the spontaneous and radical actions of contenders have provoked a chain of reactions and invalidated the dominant strategies built upon the ritualistic protest.

Framing Rearguard and Vanguard Contentions

The self-mobilisation mechanism and the field decision-making process relate Hong Kong's new activism to the worldwide Occupy Movement under the theme of participatory democracy (Maple and Kurnik, 2012). Whereas we recognise that some politically active citizens have been increasingly attached to this idea,⁷ we argue that it is the framing and bricolage of local protest traditions that proliferate this activism. In other words, perpetual struggle deviates from ritualistic protest but also builds upon it and should thus be understood in relation to it.

Contenders of different backgrounds have become comrades because of the spontaneous actions against a common enemy—the pseudo-democratic regime. A simple but adequate indicator of their anti-establishment orientation is their common dress code. Unified colour is always a symbol of political identity and a tool for mass mobilisation. By conducting participant observations and reviewing media footage, we found that at least 80 per cent of the participants in the series of salient events wore black and that approximately 10 per cent wore white.⁸ When hundreds of thousands of people observe similar dress codes during occupation, a sense of collective efficacy indicates that everyone in the field is working for the same cause.

Their choices are a matter of tradition: black has long been used in the 4 June Memorial and the 1 July March, until high incidences of hyperthermia in the latter event led to the change to white. These dim colours, as some field leaders and politicians concur, have continued to enable the contenders to express their anger

⁷ Interviews, Hong Kong, 3 and 5 March 2013.

⁸ These average numbers include both garments and vestures. Those sitting at the front or centre of the occupied site tend to have a higher percentage; those at the back or adjacent tend to have a lower percentage.

towards incompetent and undemocratic governments or to mourn the city's gradual downfall.⁹ Likewise, the red shirts and yellow shirts in Thailand's political turmoil represent the rural lower class and the urban middle class, respectively, and the claims of colour revolutions in the former communist bloc are categorised as pro-democracy (Forsyth, 2010; Stewart, 2008). These reference points are not entirely accurate but provide a popular shorthand to frame the events and appeal to a wide spectrum.

Of course, this wave of contention has been motivated by different and at times conflicting claims. Frames such as local heritage and counter-integration have attracted support across generations and across the political spectrum because they symbolise the loss of Hong Kong's identity and the erosion of its rights, freedoms, or lifestyles after the handover. However, the content of political identity or what is worth preserving or defending often unites as much as it divides. This potential divergence is managed by the interplay between the vanguard and rearguard factions. The former refers to youth activists who have experienced student or social movements. These individuals initiated the first occupation at the pier and other events that aimed to rewrite city-state's colonial history and to negate its neoliberal order. The latter faction refers to the emerging claim makers who have little social movement experience. These individuals have moved to the forefront since the Anti-curriculum event, aiming to defend the ex-colony's existing rights and freedoms and to resist socio-political integration with the Mainland. Despite their different orientations, both of these cohorts of new activists have been troubled by the increasingly ritualistic protests.

Two young activists who were at the organising committee for the 1 July rally explain the reasons for adopting an alternative path:

The annual 1 July rally has been so routinised, transforming into a ritual that one must participate in but few believe that would bring about real political change. Restrained by the label of rational and peaceful, the organisers felt compelled to brief the authority on all the detailed actions and even to assist the police to disperse the crowd at the end-point. These are absurd. How can we denounce the regime and then work with it with ease? Isn't contention supposed to be radical or at least unpredictable?

Hong Kong's crisis is not simply due to the lack of democracy but to its crony capitalism. Rising inequality and systematic disenfranchisement are more worrying. The argument that democracy is the prerequisite for social reform is not

⁹ Interviews, Hong Kong, 13 and 14 December 2013 and 5 March 2014.

only indefinite but also obsolete.¹⁰

To the vanguard activists, the problems of ritualistic protest are not only its lack of imagination but also its inability to address the roots of grievances. The advantage of pan-democrats in conventional institutions is regarded as the structural cause for making contention both moderate and routine. When people march and immediately walk away, their behaviour becomes highly expressive and predictable. Without coercion or the threat of it, the government is trained to respond to the periodic outcry but exempted from making real changes. Democratic reforms have indeed been stunted despite the cycle of ritualistic protests. This private disapproval should be read alongside the public manifesto that was delivered during the historic occupation at the pier:

On 4 April 1966, the youth Su Shou-zhong stood in front of the Starry Ferry Pier at Central and performed a hunger strike. When the clock tower he stood behind was about to be demolished, we performed a hunger strike as well. The irony is that what So was protesting was the alien, colonial regime; what we are resisting now is the government that claims to be ruled by the Hong Kong people and to serve the public (A group of Hong Kong citizens, 2006).

The origin of the post-2006 vanguard contention can be traced to the anti-colonial movement in 1966. The self-mobilisation spirit is emphasised as much as its grassroots nature. Within this reconstruction or bricolage of protest history, the ritualistic protests practised by the mainstream pan-democrats are purposively omitted. New activists attempted to attribute their direct action to the South Korean framers during the WTO ministerial conference in 2005 rather than to their fellow pan-democrats.¹¹ When the occupation tactic becomes increasingly standardised in the field and effective in soliciting concessions, this omission becomes both valid and visionary.

Whereas the vanguard faction has succeeded in placing the ritualistic tactics on trial, the rearguard faction thrives by disputing ritualistic actors. Beginning with the Anti-curriculum event, professional activists and politicians were distanced from the movement because of the fear that their involvement would render the event impure and disingenuous. This attitude was magnified in the Pro-license event, during which the pan-democrats were accused of hijacking the claim, were removed from the stage

¹⁰ Interviews, Hong Kong, 13 and 14 December 2013. See Huang and Hui (2011) for similar but less incisive comments.

¹¹ Interviews, Hong Kong, 5 September 2013 and 19 March 2014.

by a disapproving crowd, and were bullied on social media. The contenders, many of them loyal participants of contentious actions, justified these actions by expressing the desire for a spontaneous, indigenous, single-issue event rather than a political drama monopolised by the elite (*SCMP*, 17 Oct 2013).¹²

The rearguard faction has thus adopted a populist interpretation of what should be worth defending. This statement does not indicate that this faction would not construct or bricolage multiple claims into abstract principles, such as preserving Hong Kong's subjectivity or protesting Beijing's intervention. Indeed, its effective mobilisation is based on its ability to absorb and reconstruct multi-dimensional cleavages into one-dimensional conflicts along the dichotomy of national versus local. However, the majority of participants in the field decide what constitutes the content of these abstract principles or the subjects of contention. Not only does this principle induce the element of surprise, making it difficult for the government to predict the bottom line and flow of the contention, but it also appears to be free and spontaneous, which helps to expand constituency by submitting to the culture of immediacy and attracting reports of such events via mass and social media (Timlson, 2007). This collective efficacy reinforces the belief that spontaneous engagement is more effective than ritualistic protest in expressing opinions and soliciting concessions. It also positions amateur contenders as the defenders of the city-state's existing rights and freedoms, working against an undemocratic regime and incompetent activists.

Conclusion

This paper documents the transformation of Hong Kong's new activism in the post-2006 period. This transformation involves a scale shift, a prolonged interval, and vigorous performance. The precedents suggesting that contentious action is unsustainable and that institutional deliberation will ultimately rule have largely been invalidated. Occupation, which has become increasingly standardised, has served as the prerequisite for a multitude of field performances and has attracted a chorus of responses from the media, NGOs and other social actors. Furthermore, admission into formal institutions has proven not to be the primary objective of the new activism.

The legitimacy of the regime along with the idea of organised protests has thus been challenged. Although the pseudo-democratic regime is always the ultimate

¹² Interview, Hong Kong 15 March 2014.

object of contention, the practices of professional activists and politicians are also on trial. Politicians are blamed and distanced for their lack of imagination and their adherence to routine protests. Despite the periodic occurrence of organised protests, politically active citizens no longer endorse such tactic, which do not continue to enjoy undisputed righteousness.

The diffusion of vanguard and rearguard factions has extended the constituency that would not otherwise voice its opinion or rebel. Whereas the majority of the public wishes to uphold rather than rewrite the colonial past, the frames of local heritage and counter-integration have ensured support across generations and across the political spectrum. This diffusion ensures the adoption of only the occupation tactics, not the critical theories of the vanguard faction, and also explains why the events led by the rearguard faction have typically been more popular than those held by the vanguard faction. However, the prevalence of salient events inevitably turns this diffusion into polarisation because contenders are increasingly aware of and differentiated along their causes of struggle. This pattern implies that in terms of the realm of contention, society-versus-state could also be extended to society-versus-society. Hong Kong's pseudo-democracy has become not only ungovernable but also unstable because of the interplay of activism and polarisation.

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