

## **Schools, Peers, and the Political Socialization of Young Social Movement Participants in Hong Kong**

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### **Abstract**

This study aims to understand the rise of youth activism in Hong Kong by focusing on the effects of schools and peers on political socialization. Based on thirteen focus-group sessions with fifty-six young social movement participants, this study argues that Liberal Studies and teachers are two important factors contributing to the political socialization in schools of these participants. Joining peer groups in which political activism is the norm and having peers who discuss important political events or controversies are two other common ways in which young people in Hong Kong are socialized to become social movement participants. However, to fully understand the effects of schools and peers in the political socialization of young social movement participants, it also is essential to consider the political context of Hong Kong.

**Keywords:** Hong Kong, political socialization, social movement, Umbrella Movement, youth activism.

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On September 28, 2014, police forces in Hong Kong used tear gas to attempt to disperse thousands of largely peaceful prodemocracy protestors. The heavy-handed tactics of the police triggered what is now commonly known as the Umbrella Movement, which attracted worldwide attention as protestors occupied the streets of three major commercial districts in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR). The principal demand of the protestors was the introduction of universal suffrage as it is commonly understood, rather than the version of universal suffrage as laid down in the August 31, 2014 ruling of the Standing Committee of China's National People's Congress. This ruling virtually guaranteed that only two or three persons, pre-approved by Beijing and committed to protecting business interests, could be

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selected to compete through universal suffrage when Hong Kong elects its next Chief Executive in 2017.<sup>1</sup> Any observer visiting the three occupied zones would have quickly noticed that, with the possible exception of the Mongkok district, where ugly scuffles broke out more frequently than in the other two occupied zones, most of the protestors and occupiers were young people.<sup>2</sup> A representative survey, conducted in late October to early November 2014, found that 44 percent of those aged eighteen to twenty-nine had joined the Umbrella Movement, but among those aged thirty to forty-nine, and fifty or above, the figures were only 17 percent and 8 percent, respectively.<sup>3</sup> There is little doubt, therefore, that young people were the backbone of the Umbrella Movement.

Those following political developments in Hong Kong in recent years would not find this phenomenon surprising. Since the 2006 to 2007 protests against demolishing the Queen's Ferry and Star Ferry piers, young people have become more confrontational in advancing their causes. Young protestors frequently have broken through police cordon lines and occupied streets (though the scale of disruption has not yet been comparable to that of the Umbrella Movement). When protests arose against the construction of the Hong Kong section of the Guangzhou-Shenzhen-Hong Kong Express Rail Link (the anti-Express Railway Movement) in late 2009 and early 2010, the radicalization of the so-called "*bashihou*" generation (those born in the 1980s) became a hot topic in Hong Kong. The Central Policy Unit, the think tank of the Hong Kong government, commissioned a study to see whether a lack of opportunity for upward mobility in contemporary Hong Kong might be a major factor driving the rising grievances among local youth.<sup>4</sup> In the summer of 2012, Scholarism, an organization made up mostly of secondary school students, led a large-scale campaign against introducing a mandatory subject, Moral and National Education, in all primary and secondary schools. Eventually, Scholarism forced the government to make major concessions by effectively giving schools the autonomy to decide whether to implement the course. Thus, once again, the political commitment of young people in Hong Kong was demonstrated.

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<sup>1</sup> Eventually, the government's political reform proposal was rejected by the Legislative Council, meaning that the Chief Executive will continue to be elected by an Election Committee in 2017.

<sup>2</sup> The apparent different make-up of protestors in the occupied zones may be a result of the fact that, while many different political groups were effectively competing for influence at Mongkok, the two student groups that were instrumental to the Umbrella Movement, the Hong Kong Federation of Students and Scholarism, were clearly leaders in the occupied zone at Admiralty. The day-to-day running of the third and smallest occupied zone at Causeway Bay also was largely supported by young members and backers of a social movement organization.

<sup>3</sup> "Ming Pao Sponsored 'Survey on CE Election and Occupy Central Campaign' (Seventh Round)," Public Opinion Programme, University of Hong Kong (2014), <http://hkupop.hku.hk/english/report/mpCEnOCCw7/index.html> (accessed December 1, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> Xiaogang Wu, *Hong Kong's Post-80s Generation: Profiles and Predicaments* (Hong Kong: Central Policy Unit, 2010).

The emergence of youth activism in Hong Kong appears particularly dramatic considering the tradition of depoliticization that Hong Kong has embraced since its colonial days and the political alienation that has been felt for years by the city's youth.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps as an outgrowth of this, to date, scholarly studies concerned with the recent rise of youth activism have tended to focus on only two aspects. The first is how poor governance and the changing economic context have contributed to the increase of youth activism;<sup>6</sup> the second deals with the roles played by social movement organizations and their leaders and the ways social media have helped to mobilize people to join large-scale and confrontational protests.<sup>7</sup> This study goes beyond both of these considerations, seeking to better understand how young participants in social movements become politically socialized in the first place. So far, this has been studied only by Yan Wing Leung, who emphasized the role of teachers in politicizing secondary school student activists in Hong Kong.<sup>8</sup> Examining the process of political socialization is important if we are to explain the rise of youth activism comprehensively, because economic change and governing errors alone do not automatically prompt people to take to the streets. Although it is possible for a young person to take part in social movements simply out of curiosity, it is highly unlikely that he or she would engage in sustained political activism without being critical of the status quo. Although the importance of the Internet as a mobilization tool and platform for expressing discontent has been documented,<sup>9</sup> this does not mean it is the primary agent contributing to

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<sup>5</sup> See Sai-Wing Leung, *The Making of an Alienated Generation* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 1997), and George Ngai, *Political Socialization in Hong Kong Schools* (Saarbrücken, Germany: LAP LAMBERT Academic Publishing, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> See Chor-yung Cheng, "Hong Kong's Systemic Crisis of Governance and the Revolt of the 'Post-80s' Youths—The Anti-Express Rail Campaign," in *New Trends of Political Participation in Hong Kong*, ed. Joseph Y. S. Cheng (Hong Kong: City University of Hong Kong Press, 2014), 417-447; Joseph Y. S. Cheng, "The Emergence of Radical Politics in Hong Kong: Causes and Impact," *China Review* 14, no. 1 (2014): 199-232; and Nick Hin Kin Or and Calvin Hiu Ming Lau, "The Rise of Transgressive Contention by Young Activists: Recent Cases in Hong Kong," *Journal of Youth Studies* 17, no. 1 (2014): 57-77.

<sup>7</sup> Daniel Garrett and Wing-chung Ho, "Hong Kong at the Brink: Emerging Forms of Political Participation in the New Social Movement," *New Trends of Political Participation in Hong Kong*, ed. Joseph Y. S. Cheng (Hong Kong: City University of Hong Kong Press, 2014), 362-372; Calvin H. M. Lau, "Political Participation of the Post-80s Generation: Their Protest Activities and Social Movements in Recent Years in Hong Kong," in *New Trends of Political Participation in Hong Kong*, ed. Joseph Y. S. Cheng (Hong Kong: City University of Hong Kong Press, 2014), 397-400; Iam Chong Ip, "Jiti Xingdongli Yu Shehui Yundong" [Collective efficacy and social movement], in *Xianggang, Shenghuo, Wenhua* [Hong Kong, lifestyle, culture], ed. Tai-lok Lui, Chun-hung Ng, and Eric Kit-wai Ma (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 2011), 117-149; and Or and Lau, "The Rise of Transgressive Contention by Young Activists."

<sup>8</sup> Yan Wing Leung, "How Do They Become Socially/Politically Active? Case Studies of Hong Kong Secondary Students' Political Socialisation," *Citizenship Teaching and Learning* 2, no. 2 (2006): 51-67.

<sup>9</sup> Garrett and Ho, "Hong Kong at the Brink," 369-372.

politicizing and radicalizing young people; other important agents also may be at work. This study concentrates on the roles played by two of these agents, namely schools and peers.

### Schools and Peers as Political Socialization Agents

Scholarly literature often has considered schools and peers, along with parents and the media, to be the most important agents of political socialization, although as Erik Amna suggested, no consensus yet exists on how schools encourage adolescents to become politically active.<sup>10</sup> Studies in the West have shown that schools help socialize adolescents to become politically active through such means as fostering civic norms,<sup>11</sup> offering civic education courses,<sup>12</sup> discussing political issues in class (sometimes called the open classroom climate),<sup>13</sup> and developing civic skills through school clubs and activities outside the classroom.<sup>14</sup>

In Hong Kong, however, civic education from the colonial years into the post-1997 period never has sought to socialize students to become participatory citizens.<sup>15</sup> Studies on political socialization and citizenship education in Hong Kong schools have shown that they have taken little interest in this type of education. In fact, discussion of political issues has not been encouraged, and even may have been avoided.<sup>16</sup> In other words, if the formal curriculum has

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<sup>10</sup> Erik Amna, "How Is Civic Engagement Developed over Time? Emerging Answers from a Multidisciplinary Field," *Journal of Adolescence* 35, no. 3 (2012): 619.

<sup>11</sup> David E. Campbell, *Why We Vote: How Schools and Communities Shape Our Civic Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 173.

<sup>12</sup> Richard G. Niemi and Jane Junn, *Civic Education: What Makes Students Learn* (New Heaven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), and James G. Gimpel, J. Celeste Lay, and Jason E. Schuknecht, *Cultivating Democracy: Civic Environments and Political Socialization in America* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2003), 145-168.

<sup>13</sup> David E. Campbell, "Voice in the Classroom: How an Open Classroom Climate Fosters Political Engagement among Adolescents," *Political Behavior* 30, no. 4 (2008): 437-454, and Blen Quintelier, "The Effect of Schools on Political Participation: A Multilevel Logistic Analysis," *Research Papers in Education* 25, no. 2 (2010): 137-154.

<sup>14</sup> Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady, *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 416-460, and Quintelier, "The Effects of Schools on Political Participation."

<sup>15</sup> Gregory P. Fairbrother, *Toward Critical Patriotism: Student Resistance to Political Education in Hong Kong and China* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2003), 35-52; Yan Wing Leung and Wai Wa Yuen, "A Critical Reflection of the Evolution of Civic Education in Hong Kong Schools," *Pacific-Asian Education* 21, no. 1 (2009): 35-50; and Thomas Kwan-choi Tse, *The Poverty of Political Education in Hong Kong Secondary Schools* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies, Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1997).

<sup>16</sup> Paul Morris and Esther Morris, "Becoming Civil in Hong Kong: A Tale of Two Schools," *International Journal of Educational Research* 35, no. 1 (2001): 11-27; Yan Wing Leung and Hoi Yu Ng, "Delivering Civic Education in Hong Kong: Why Is It Not an Independent Subject?" *Citizenship, Social and Economics Education* 13, no. 1 (2014): 2-13; and Ngai, *Political Socialization in Hong Kong Schools*.

had any impact on the political attitudes of young people in Hong Kong, it has been to depoliticize them rather than to encourage them to actively take part in social movements.<sup>17</sup> This may have begun to change, however, when the course, Liberal Studies, was introduced as a compulsory subject for the 2012 Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination, meaning that all fourth-year secondary students have been exposed to it since 2009, when the “334” academic structure (three-year junior high, three-year senior high, and four-year undergraduate degree program) began to replace the original “523” academic structure (five-year secondary education, two-year matriculation, and three-year undergraduate degree program) in Hong Kong. According to the government, the introduction of Liberal Studies was “a response to the community’s expressed needs for a cross-curricular learning opportunity for all senior secondary students.”<sup>18</sup> The subject emphasizes an “issue-inquiry approach,” requiring students to look “into contemporary issues which affect themselves, their society, their nation, the human world.”<sup>19</sup> One of the subject’s modules is “Hong Kong Today,” which includes the theme, “Rule of Law and Socio-Political Participation.” The key question from this theme is, “How do Hong Kong residents participate in political and social affairs and come to grips with rights and responsibilities with respect to the rule of law?”<sup>20</sup> Such a pedagogical curriculum design means that it is now impossible for teachers and students in Hong Kong secondary schools to completely avoid political issues in class.<sup>21</sup> As youth activism has risen in recent years, some conservative political figures in Hong Kong have begun to blame the Liberal Studies curriculum for helping to politicize youth and influence them to participate in social movements.<sup>22</sup> Hence, the present study seeks to shed light on the role (if any) played by Liberal Studies in socializing secondary school students to actively engage in social movements.

In addition to the possible role of Liberal Studies, teachers also may be significant agents of political socialization in Hong Kong schools. As Yan Wing Leung observed, the secondary school students he interviewed in 2005 and 2006 became politicized and committed to political activism by

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<sup>17</sup> Tse, *The Poverty of Political Education in Hng Kong Secondary Schools*, 35.

<sup>18</sup> Curriculum Development Council and the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority, *Liberal Studies: Curriculum and Assessment Guide* (Secondary 4-6) (Hong Kong: Hong Kong, Education and Manpower Bureau, HKSARG, 2007), 2.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 4, 5.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>21</sup> Leung and Yuen, “A Critical Reflection of the Evolution of Civic Education in Hong Kong Schools,” 40.

<sup>22</sup> For example, see Priscilla Mei-fun Leung, “Mohei Wuzhu Tongshi Taolun” [Ungrounded criticism does not contribute to discussions about Liberal Studies], *Sing Tao Daily*, September 3, 2013, A15.

encountering credible, likeable teachers who aroused their interest in politics through teaching based on current affairs and experimental learning.<sup>23</sup> This study, therefore, discusses whether and how teachers may be contributing to the political socialization of young people in Hong Kong since the rise of youth activism in recent years.

In their seminal work on political socialization, M. Kent Jennings and Richard Niemi treated peer influence as part of the school socialization process.<sup>24</sup> Although students usually know their peers in schools, the present study separated the influence of peers from the political socialization experienced in schools, even though the peers contributing to the socialization process were schoolmates. This separation was necessary because not only can students socialize with peers who never have gone to the same school, but also schoolmates can interact outside school. Moreover, the school context is dominated by vertical social relationships (e.g., schools and teachers control the curriculum and teaching styles, and even teacher interactions with students outside the classroom do not occur on an equal footing, with teachers usually dominating), whereas relationships among peers are relatively horizontal.

The influence of peers particularly deserves our attention, given that two recent studies based in Sweden and Belgium have argued that peers are more influential in politically socializing young people than other agents such as parents and schools.<sup>25</sup> Peers can contribute to socialization through pressure within a social network,<sup>26</sup> or through discussions about politics and current affairs among themselves.<sup>27</sup> Scholars studying the relationship between social movement mobilization and social networks also have acknowledged the importance of peers.<sup>28</sup> However, whereas this literature has tended to study how social movement organizations mobilize potential participants through social networks, those participating in the large-scale protests in Hong Kong usually have not belonged to such organizations. Instead, the prodemocracy protestors in Hong Kong have tended to regard their peers as the most

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<sup>23</sup> Leung, "How Do They Become Socially/Politically Active?"

<sup>24</sup> M. Kent Jennings and Richard G. Niemi, *The Political Character of Adolescence: The Influence of Families and Schools* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974), 229-248.

<sup>25</sup> Mats Ekstrom and Johan Ostman, "Family Talk, Peer Talk and Young People's Civic Orientation," *European Journal of Communication* 28, no. 3 (2013): 294-308, and Ellen Quintelier, "Engaging Adolescents in Politics: The Longitudinal Effect of Political Socialization Agents," *Youth & Society* 20, no. 10 (2013): 1-19. See also, Eugénie Dostie-Goulet, "Social Networks and Development of Political Interest," *Journal of Youth Studies* 12, no. 4 (2009): 405-421.

<sup>26</sup> Betsy Sinclair, *The Social Citizen: Peer Networks and Political Behavior* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 151-153.

<sup>27</sup> Casey A. Klofstad, *Civic Talk: Peers, Politics and the Future of Democracy* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011).

<sup>28</sup> Mario Diani and Doug McAdam, eds., *Social Movements and Networks: Relational Approaches to Collective Action* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

important agents for mobilizing them to join protests.<sup>29</sup> At the same time, these protestors usually are embedded in politically supportive networks, in that their friends and families frequently discuss politics with them and support their participation in the protests.<sup>30</sup> Unfortunately, despite the clear importance of peers, so far, qualitative data have been lacking that could help us to understand political socialization among them in Hong Kong. Moreover, studies on the relationship between social movement participation and social networks have focused mainly on mobilization, not on how people originally became interested in politics, or why they have believed it to be necessary to take part in collective action (similar to the process of cognitive liberation commonly used in the social movement literature). Thus, this study also may enrich our understanding of the role played by social networks and peers in encouraging people to participate in social movements.

### **Political Context and Political Socialization**

While the focus of this study is the impact of schools and peers on young participants in social movements in Hong Kong, as will be illustrated by the empirical data, the effects of these two political socialization agents must be understood in the political context of contemporary Hong Kong. Although political context has not been widely regarded as important in the political socialization literature, several studies in the United States have demonstrated its relevance, particularly the impact of landmark political events on the political socialization process.<sup>31</sup> However, the influence of landmark political events is uneven, as the effect is stronger on people who engage routinely in interpersonal political communications<sup>32</sup> and on those who are most attentive to information related to landmark events.<sup>33</sup> If these findings are applicable also in Hong Kong, the subject, Liberal Studies, can increase the influence of important political events on students because the course requires students to pay attention to and discuss politics. Moreover, we can expect those having peers who like to engage in political discussions to be more influenced by important political events than young people who do not have such peers.

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<sup>29</sup> Francis L. F. Lee and Joseph M. Chan, *Media, Social Mobilization and Mass Protests in Post-Colonial Hong Kong: The Power of a Critical Event* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2011), 58, 151.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 154-157.

<sup>31</sup> Gimpel et al, *Cultivating Democracy*, 169-192; Krista Jenkins, *Mothers, Daughters, and Political Socialization: Two Generations at an American Women's College* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013); David O. Sears and Nicholas A. Valentino, "Politics Matters: Political Events as Catalysts for Preadult Socialization," *American Political Science Review* 91, no. 1 (1997): 45-65; and Nicholas A. Valentino and David O. Sears, "Event-driven Political Communication and the Preadult Socialization of Partisanship," *Political Behavior* 20, no. 2 (1998): 127-154.

<sup>32</sup> Valentino and Sears, "Event-driven Political Communication."

<sup>33</sup> Gimpel et al, *Cultivating Democracy*, 191.

Table 1. Number of Public Order Events

Year	Public Processions	Public Meetings	Total	Year	Public Processions	Public Meetings	Total
2005	887	1,013	1,900	2010	1,137	4,519	5,656
2006	937	1,291	2,228	2011	1,515	5,363	6,878
2007	968	2,856	3,824	2012	1,930	5,599	7,529
2008	1,007	3,280	4,287	2013	1,179	4,987	6,166
2009	1,017	3,205	4,222	2014	1,103	5,715	6,818

Source: Hong Kong Police Force (2015), [http://www.police.gov.hk/ppp\\_en/09\\_statistics/poes.html](http://www.police.gov.hk/ppp_en/09_statistics/poes.html) (accessed January 31, 2016).

Table 2. Number of “Confrontational” Protests in Hong Kong from 2004 to 2015

Year	Number	Year	Number	Year	Number
2004	2	2008	0	2012	5
2005	2	2009	4	2013	2
2006	1	2010	3	2014	5
2007	1	2011	3	2-15	4

Since 2003, when the government’s attempt to introduce a National Security Bill ended in failure after it prompted half a million people to protest in the streets, Hong Kong’s political scene has become increasingly confrontational. Table 1 shows that, according to the Hong Kong Police Force, the number of “public order events,” which includes many political protests and demonstrations, has increased rapidly over recent years. Alternatively, table 2 shows the number of “confrontational” protests that took place from 2004 to 2015.<sup>34</sup> Although there were no more than two “confrontational”

<sup>34</sup> What counts as a “confrontational protest” is obviously contentious. I include protests that led the police to use pepper spray and protests that ended with protestors forcibly removed by police or in the presence of police. Such a definition, of course, is not perfect. For example, the protestors’ disruption of a public consultation session in 2011 over the “replacement mechanism” (when there is a vacancy in the Legislative Council) is not included, even though several people were injured during the scuffle and seven protestors were subsequently arrested. Protests against a single commercial entity such as a bank also are not included in the table because the protestors were not demanding policy changes by the government. I used the Wisenews database to search for articles, including the keywords “pepper spray” (*hujiào penwu*) or “clearance” (*qingchang*), published in *Apple Daily* and *Mingpao* before determining whether the reported protests fulfilled the aforementioned criterion of being a “confrontational protest.” A protest that lasted for several days is counted as one protest, even though the police may have used force to end the protest more than once. For instance, the Umbrella Movement and the student protests that preceded it are considered one single protest.



protests reported annually from 2004 to 2008, the occurrence of three to five confrontational protests has been the norm since 2009, with the exception of 2013. This development is particularly significant because many activists and the prodemocracy camp celebrated the July 1<sup>st</sup> protest of 2003 for its “orderly” manner. As the political atmosphere in Hong Kong has become more confrontational, the annual July 1<sup>st</sup> protest, organized by the Civil Human Rights Front, has become an event in which the opposition forces demonstrate their strength. The annual run-up to the anniversary of the June 4<sup>th</sup> crackdown, when in 1989 the People’s Liberation Army violently suppressed the democratic movement in Beijing, also has generated controversies. For example, in April and May 2009, prior to the twentieth anniversary of the crackdown, the controversial viewpoints expressed by then Chief Executive Donald Tsang and the president of the Student Union of Hong Kong University created major stirs. The research participants in this study mentioned all of these incidents, together with the protests against the demolition of the Star Ferry Pier/Queen’s Pier and the anti-Express Railway movement discussed earlier, when they were recalling the process of their political socialization.

In addition to the confrontational tactics adopted by the young protestors, since the League of Social Democrats first participated in the Legislative Council Elections in 2008, politicians from the opposition camp also have generated headlines by using controversial tactics. These tactics have included deliberate disruption of the Chief Executive’s Question and Answer sessions in the Legislative Council, filibuster during the meetings of the Legislative Council, and the resignations of five Legislative Council members from the Civic Party and the League of Social Democrats in 2010. Both parties hoped that the by-elections in all five geographical constituencies in Hong Kong that were triggered by the resignations would become a *de facto* referendum that would pressure Beijing and the HKSAR government to introduce universal suffrage in Hong Kong in 2012. It is important to bear in mind that many of the participants in this study became interested in politics only after the confrontational protests and controversial tactics adopted by political figures had become more common in Hong Kong. The following discussion shows how important political events and the increasingly tense political climate contributed to the research participants’ involvement in political protests.

## **Method**

This study is based on thirteen focus group sessions, conducted in Cantonese, between July and September 2012. In total, there were fifty-six participants (thirty-eight males, eighteen females). The youngest participant was sixteen and the oldest was twenty-nine. Most participants were students: twenty-one in secondary school (eighteen having experience with Liberal Studies) and twenty in university or college. Their first protest experience occurred when these forty-one participants were students. Among the participants who had

completed their full-time studies, all but two recalled that they first began participating in protests when they were still engaged in full-time study, meaning that they first became politicized as students.

The participants were recruited during the July 1<sup>st</sup> protest organized by the Civil Human Rights Front in 2012. Student helpers were instructed to conduct face-to-face surveys among the young demonstrators. The short survey questionnaire included questions about the respondents' personal information (e.g., educational level, job, personal contacts) and their protest experience. After collecting around 220 questionnaires, which recorded mobile phone numbers of the respondents, during the protest, those who took part in the survey were invited to participate in the focus group discussions. The original idea was that different focus groups should be formed based on three criteria: gender, protest experience (i.e., whether joining the July 1<sup>st</sup> protest in 2012 was one of the participant's first protest experiences), and whether he or she was a full-time worker, college/university student, or secondary school student. Because most of those who agreed to participate in the focus group sessions were males, and due to the need to accommodate the participants' schedules, only one "female-only" focus group session was conducted. Six sessions were mixed-gender.

During the focus group sessions, the participants were invited to share both their political orientations and experiences with protests, as well as how they first had become interested in politics and involved in social movements. Their accounts pinpointed four major socialization agents: families, media, peers, and schools. In all focus group sessions, the participants were welcomed to discuss their political interactions with their peers. In sessions in which secondary school students were involved, they were asked about their experience with Liberal Studies. Of course, it cannot be claimed that conducting focus group sessions with fifty-six young social movement participants represented the general experience of all such participants in Hong Kong. Further, relying on focus group data to explore political socialization may have meant that other socializing agents that influenced the participants were overlooked, if the participants were unaware of the influence of these agents on them.<sup>35</sup> Yet, despite these limitations, the focus group discussions provided valuable qualitative data on how young social activists understood the process of their political socialization, something that the literature, dominated by quantitative studies, has not yet sufficiently explored.

## **Political Socialization in Hong Kong Schools**

Almost all of the research participants who attributed their political socialization to school were the younger participants (i.e., those who were still

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<sup>35</sup> Klofstad, *Civic Talk*, 48.

full-time students), particularly those who were still in secondary school. For those already working full-time, only one participant thought his secondary school had helped to socialize him politically.<sup>36</sup> This does not mean, however, that secondary schools have become more interested in encouraging students to participate in politics in recent years. Indeed, only one secondary school student, participant #42 (male secondary school student) believed that increasing student interest in politics was clearly on his school's agenda. He stated: "Since being in Secondary One, my school started doing a lot of things [to raise our interest in politics]; for example, forums were organized so that even if people didn't care, when you were buying a snack ... you would still be able to hear [the discussion]."

Actually, political education was not taken seriously in most of the secondary schools, and a few participants, usually those most actively involved in social movements, described how their schools even attempted to discourage them from political activism. For instance, participant #15 (male secondary school student), an active volunteer in a political party, said that leaflets he had brought to school were confiscated and that his principal had talked with him several times to discourage him from becoming politically involved. Participant #8 (female secondary school student), who did not fear directly confronting the police during protests, similarly revealed that her teachers had tried to talk her out of participating in social movements, and she alleged that her arts teacher had given her a low grade because she had insisted on including political messages in her art work.

While few secondary schools were ready to overtly encourage their students to become political, Liberal Studies did contribute to politicizing some students, since twelve of the eighteen participants who took this course mentioned its influence. Participant #41 (male secondary school student) claimed it was a major reason he had become interested in politics: "In the Liberal Studies lesson, a lot of unfairness issues are taught; that's why I began to pay attention to politics." Although participant #41 implied that he had become critical of the status quo due to Liberal Studies, most of the other research participants who considered the subject important to their political socialization suggested that the class did not directly make participating in social movements attractive to them. Most of these research participants noted that Liberal Studies made them pay more attention to politics and current affairs before they gradually became ready to take part in social movements that challenged the status quo. The following are two examples:

I was studying Liberal Studies at that time [i.e., when the anti-Express Railway movement reached its climax], so I

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<sup>36</sup> It is possible that those participants who had left secondary school several years earlier tended to downplay their political socialization at that time because of the amount of time that had elapsed.

think there were things I needed to learn more about. Then I learned that people were doing corrupt things and so on, so if I didn't try to stop them, I would be guilty as well (participant #51, male secondary school student).

Because of Liberal Studies, we have been encouraged to follow the news. So probably this has made students pay more attention to the news, and when they see those unfair situations, people will talk about them on Facebook, offering their opinion, saying that the government is getting worse, something like that. When you see a lot of these posts, you would pay attention, too (participant #22, female secondary school student).

In other words, it seems that for both of these participants, their experience with Liberal Studies only indirectly influenced them to become social movement participants because of the politicized atmosphere and political events taking place in Hong Kong when they were studying the subject. Participant #22 also suggested that the subject increased her schoolmates' interest in politics, and, thus, her peers began to criticize the government on Facebook. Her account, therefore, implies the importance of peers, which is the focus of the next section.

Participant #2 (female university student), who took Liberal Studies when it was still an elective, reflected on the combined effect of Liberal Studies and Hong Kong's changing political climate, suggesting that her Liberal Studies teacher encouraged her and her classmates to join protests to increase their understanding of social issues. According to her, "the teacher would often talk about what was happening in society. He also encouraged us students to join protests, so that we could feel what was going on."

The account of participant #2 also drew our attention to the influence of individual teachers. In an earlier study of how younger generations learned about June 4<sup>th</sup>, Francis Lee and Joseph Chan found that the teachers' accounts of the event were a major mechanism through which the memory of the event was transmitted to the next generation.<sup>37</sup> Several of the research participants also recalled how their secondary school teachers talked about this tragic event:

Our Liberal Studies teacher showed us a video clip about June 4<sup>th</sup> on the anniversary day to let us understand the event.  
... When you know that this has happened, you would begin

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<sup>37</sup> Francis L. F. Lee and Joseph Man Chan, "Generational Transmission of Collective Memory about Tianamen in Hong Kong: How Young Rally Participants Learn about and Understand 4 June," *Journal of Contemporary China* 22, no. 84 (2013): 974-976.

to pay attention when watching the news ... you would feel that was really shameful ... you would want to join protests (participant #44, female secondary school student).

I became interested in politics around 2007. At that time, a secondary school teacher talked about the June 4<sup>th</sup> incident ... I was moved and therefore went to the June 4<sup>th</sup> candlelight vigil (participant #54, male secondary school student).

In a citizenship education class in Secondary One, we were shown photos about the June 4<sup>th</sup> incident from the website of the Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements of China (participant #32, male secondary school student).

Individual teachers can politicize students in other ways. Participant #40, who also claimed that Liberal Studies had prompted his interest in current affairs, and participant #48 both credited inspirational teachers for their politicization:

The teacher would tell me different viewpoints concerning an issue and let me analyze the issue. I think the most important thing is that I was encouraged to think comprehensively. ... I was enlightened in politics in such a way (participant #40, male secondary school student).

When I was in Secondary Three, the history teacher talked a lot about things not in the syllabus. ... Gradually I became interested and often found the teacher to have discussions ... the teacher then taught me to understand politics (participant #48, female secondary school student).

In summary, even though there is scant evidence that schools recently have paid more attention to political or civics education, schools should nonetheless be regarded important agents for politically socializing youth and bolstering student activism in Hong Kong, particularly among younger social movement participants who have taken Liberal Studies in secondary school. The introduction of Liberal Studies as a compulsory subject and the encouragement or inspiration of individual teachers were two major mechanisms through which the social movement participants learned to become critical of the status quo and politically involved. As emphasized earlier, however, Liberal Studies generally only increased a student's political awareness or interest. A student's transformation into a social movement participant could be explained only when other factors were taken into account. One of these factors is Hong

Kong's political climate over recent years. In the absence of frequent large-scale protests and without the adoption of confrontational tactics by political opposition forces, the introduction of Liberal Studies likely would have made students more aware of politics, yet without necessarily leading them into political activism. Another potential factor, as demonstrated by the quotation provided by participant #22 presented earlier, is peer influence, which is the focus of the next section. Moreover, teachers may have found it easier to arouse students' interest in politics and mass mobilization in recent years because of the increase in large-scale demonstrations and confrontational protests in Hong Kong. The introduction of Liberal Studies as a compulsory subject since 2009 has offered more opportunities for passionate teachers to encourage their students to question the political status quo, as well.

### **Peer Influence, Political Socialization, and the Importance of Political Context**

Whereas those who considered school an important agent of political socialization were almost exclusively full-time students, few secondary school students emphasized peer influence when talking about their own socialization. Instead, those who did almost exclusively were working full-time already or studying at a college or university. Like political socialization in the school context, the accounts provided by the older participants revealed two major mechanisms through which peers could politicize other peers into political activism.

For some participants, entering social science or humanities programs in a college or university meant that they met schoolmates who were more political than other peers. The experience of one participant, whose first protest experience occurred as an undergraduate during the anti-Express Railway Movement, is an example. Majoring in philosophy, he discovered that being interested in politics was virtually the norm for his new peers at his university:

I didn't pay attention to politics when I was in secondary school. But after going to university, there were a lot of opportunities for me to learn about politics. ... In the Department of Philosophy, the students there are very interested in politics ... when I log in to my Facebook account, the things they share are all political stuff (participant #6, male graduate student).

The experience of another participant was similar. She had no interest in politics before she enrolled in a social work program at a local tertiary institution. There, she found the atmosphere among her fellow social work students very political. She said:

There were discussions about the anti-Express Railway

Movement, Occupy Central [the anti-capitalist movement inspired by Occupy Wall Street], and so on. ... Many students, along with some lecturers, would join the protests together (participant #23, female university student).

Participant #23 was not alone in mentioning the influence of peers when discussing large-scale protests. Many other participants also talked about the effect of landmark political events or the politicized atmosphere in Hong Kong when acknowledging peer influence in their political socialization experience. Those events and the politicized atmosphere facilitated peer influence in terms of prompting young people in Hong Kong to pay attention to politics and attracting them to social movement participation. The following accounts show how peers contributed to political socialization when major political events or issues, such as the July 1<sup>st</sup> protest in 2013, the twentieth anniversary of the June 4<sup>th</sup> crackdown, and the *de facto* referendum campaign in 2010, were becoming important talking points in Hong Kong:

I was a secondary school student at that time [2003] ... some classmates asked me to go [to the July 1<sup>st</sup> protest in 2003]. At that time the atmosphere was like ... [it] made you feel that going to the protest was a must (participant #11, male secondary school teacher).

That year [the twentieth anniversary of June 4<sup>th</sup>] was really special; suddenly many friends thought that that issue was very meaningful. They shared related things [through the Internet]; I therefore joined the candlelight vigil (participant #55, male university student).

I first took part in politics during the *de facto* referendum. ... A schoolmate who was already actively joining the social movement influenced me a lot. I would chat with her a lot (participant #3, female university student).

As noted earlier, politics was not seen as a major concern of young people in Hong Kong until recently. The occurrence of so many large-scale and confrontational protests and the increasingly politicized atmosphere in Hong Kong has made politics much more acceptable among Hong Kong peer groups than previously. Joining protests has become even a social event among some peers. One student commented on this change:

Within this one year or so, because of the confrontations, more people are concerned about politics. For example, you wouldn't talk about Raymond Wong with friends in the past,

but nowadays when chatting with friends, very often we will talk about political stuff (participant #51, male secondary school student).<sup>38</sup>

### **The Limitations of Peer Influence**

Although peer influence was a major political socialization agent among the study's participants, and almost all reported going with their friends to the July 1<sup>st</sup> protest in 2012 (showing they were usually embedded in politically supportive networks), most participants did not have a politically homogeneous social network. Indeed, many focus group sessions became sharing sessions among the participants who expressed their frustration over friends who had no interest in politics. A typical example is the following exchange from one focus group session:

I think most young people are still quite apathetic. I asked my friends and my classmates to join protests, but out of 40 people, probably only one or two were willing to join me (participant #42, male secondary school student).

I understand that. I also asked people to join me on June 4<sup>th</sup> and July 1<sup>st</sup>, too, but they asked me what's the point of protesting (participant #40, male secondary school student)?

In another focus group session, a social science major in a local university complained that all of her friends in her university hostel were

typical Hong Kong people. They just avoid political stuff in their lives; they are only interested in internships, going to the pub—they like having fun and making money. But they are my friends, so I don't talk a lot about politics with them (participant #1, female university student).

This statement prompted the following response from another participant:

This doesn't occur only in your institution. I think most people in Hong Kong or young people in Hong Kong are like this. I can discuss politics with students studying social work or social policy, but when I ask friends on Whatsapp whether they would go to protest, friends from other chat groups [i.e.,

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<sup>38</sup> Raymond Wong is a Legislative Councilor, well known for his confrontational actions during meetings.



those not studying social work or social policy] would not respond at all (participant #3, female university student).

In a research study conducted in 2006, Lee and Chan found that even those who participated in the July 1<sup>st</sup> protests in both 2003 and 2004 emphasized in focus group discussions that they lacked interest in politics, demonstrating the legacy of Hong Kong's long-held tradition of depoliticization.<sup>39</sup> However, because participants in the current study usually were ready to complain about their politically apathetic friends (thereby implying that they themselves were committed to politics), perhaps this generation of social movement participants is willing to embrace politics more wholeheartedly.

Although it was common to hear higher education students say that students in the social sciences or humanities were more political than others, or that those studying other subjects were not politically inspired, some research participants complained that many of their peers studying social science took no interest in politics. In other words, not all peer groups formed by social science or humanities students necessarily were active politically. For example, a participant who was studying social work in college, said,

I feel quite lonely because apart from social work students, it is very difficult to find students from other programs willing to talk about politics. Even in the social work program, you have to choose whom to talk with; otherwise they can't understand what you say when you begin to mention politics (participant #19, male college student).

Likewise, another participant said that, even though he usually went to protests with his social work schoolmates when he was still in college, those who joined him were a minority:

Around 10 percent [of social work students would join protests]. It would be great if 12 of us from the same year would join. ... That's why I always mobilized on campus, but they [students not interested in joining] thought I was too troublesome (participant #21, male social worker).

In addition to complaining about their politically apathetic friends, some participants said they felt frustrated when they had to deal with friends who were not only uninterested in politics, but also explicitly disagreed with their political activism. The following accounts are two examples.

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<sup>39</sup> Francis L. F. Lee and Joseph M. Chan, "Making Sense of Participation: The Political Culture of Pro-democracy Demonstrators in Hong Kong," *China Quarterly* 193 (2008): 93.

I went to the July 1<sup>st</sup> protest and I actually joined the protest on my own. I expressed my feelings on Facebook, but I was afraid to say too much. My friends would probably think I am too extreme. ... Some friends did talk with me in such a way; they would look at you in a strange way (participant #56, female unemployed).

Once ... a former secondary schoolmate told me that you ... should bear the negative aspects of Hong Kong. ... Well, when I heard things like this, I felt very powerless. It's impossible to convince people like this, or even properly discuss with them ... I would stop debating with people like him quickly. We are friends anyway, so it's not necessary to engage in long or never-ending debates (participant #5, male editor).

Even though participants #5 and #56 felt uneasy discussing politics with some friends, most research participants said they kept trying to raise their friends' consciousness through discussions and sharing opinions about political issues on Facebook. In short, their frustration rarely caused them to discontinue their attempts to act as political socialization agents themselves, and their exposure to politically apathetic or even conservative peers did not induce them to give up on their cause or on joining protests and convincing their friends to join them. Their accounts support the results of recent studies that, contrary to earlier ones, suggest exposure to different political opinions in one's social network does not necessarily have a negative effect on one's political participation.<sup>40</sup>

The accounts provided by the participants also appeared to support the suggestion that interest in politics was what drove discussion about it (rather than vice versa) and, hence, fostered political disagreement.<sup>41</sup> Because the politically active and committed young social movement participants were

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<sup>40</sup> For example, see Alan S. Gerber, Gregory A. Huber, David Doherty, and Conor M. Dowling, "Disagreement and the Avoidance of Political Discussion: Aggregate Relationships and Differences across Personality Traits," *American Journal of Political Science* 56, no. 4 (2012): 849-874; Scott D. McClurg, "The Electoral Relevance of Political Talk: Examining Disagreement and Expertise Effects in Social Networks on Political Participation," *American Journal of Political Science* 50, no. 3 (2006): 737-754; and Lilach Nir, "Ambivalent Social Networks and Their Consequences for Participation," *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 17, no. 4 (2005): 422-442. For studies which suggest that exposure to different political opinions in one's social network could be detrimental to political participation, see Diana C. Mutz, "The Consequences of Cross-cutting Networks and Political Participation," *American Journal of Political Science* 46, no. 4 (2002): 838-855, and id., *Hearing the Other Side: Deliberative versus Participatory Democracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 123.

<sup>41</sup> C. J. Pattie and R. J. Johnston, "Conversation, Disagreement and Political Participation," *Political Behavior* 31, no. 2 (2009): 284.

determined to increase support for their causes, they were much more likely to try to initiate political discussions than others who were less politically minded. Conversely, those who were not interested in politics were relatively unlikely to start political discussions and even may have avoided them. Some research participants indicated that, because they were known to actively participate in politics, under certain circumstances, friends who were usually apathetic would ask them political questions. Because they were willing to initiate political discussions with people having different political views, and their friends understood them to be a source of political information, these people were likely to discuss politics more frequently with those who did not agree with them politically, as long as they did not completely break ties and renounce their friendship with them.

## Conclusion

The foregoing analysis shows that, although there is little evidence that secondary schools in Hong Kong are more willing to politicize their students today than previously, they still contribute to making students politically aware and influencing them to participate in social movements in two major ways. First, the effect of introducing Liberal Studies as a compulsory subject was evident in the participants' comments. Second, the influence of individual teachers was significant, a rather surprising finding given that teacher influence is rarely mentioned in the political socialization literature. Nonetheless, not only has Yan Wing Leung demonstrated how important teachers are to helping turn secondary school students in Hong Kong into activists,<sup>42</sup> but also a recent study on members of the Scottish Socialist Party found that teachers were the most important factor contributing to the research subjects' commitment to radical politics.<sup>43</sup> This likely shows that, although teachers may not be crucial to fostering conventional forms of political participation, they may play a much more compelling role by influencing students to become critical of the status quo and even radicalizing them. Nevertheless, had the political climate been different in Hong Kong, the impact of Liberal Studies and teachers might have been very different. Although Liberal Studies can raise student interest in politics and increase how often students discuss political matters, this does not guarantee that students will become critical of the status quo and thus undertake political protests against authorities. The large-scale protests triggered by the government's controversial decisions and the confrontational tactics adopted by the opposition forces in recent years made it more likely that young people's interest in politics fostered by Liberal Studies would be channeled into

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<sup>42</sup> Leung, "How Do They Become Socially/Politically Active?"

<sup>43</sup> Liam Kane, "The Influence of Teachers on the Development of Political Radicals: A Case Study of Members of the Scottish Socialist Party," *British Educational Research Journal* 39, no. 5 (2013): 872-891.

political activism. The increase in the number of confrontational protests since 2009 (see table 2), when Liberal Studies became a compulsory subject, may therefore not be a coincidence. The rise in confrontational protests that many secondary school students discussed in conjunction with their introduction to Liberal Studies may have indirectly increased the students' interest in social movement participation. And with more young people willing to take part in social movement activities, protests (including confrontational protests) also could attract more sympathizers and participants. In a similar vein, teachers who want to socialize their students to become social movement participants may have found it easier to do so in recent years because of the increase in the number of confrontational protests and the introduction of Liberal Studies, which means that discussions between Liberal Studies teachers and students about politics are now unavoidable.

Peers also may have contributed to politicizing the participants through two channels. The first was through joining a peer group (usually for those studying social sciences or humanities in a college or university) where political activism was the norm. Although such activism may not have been typical of most social science and humanities students in Hong Kong, it was clear that peer groups in these programs were important to politically socializing some of the research participants. The second channel came through increasing political awareness among peers and mobilizing people when large-scale political events were taking place. Similar to the influence of Liberal Studies, the impact of peers should be understood by taking into account the recent political climate in Hong Kong. Because political issues often have become major talking points in Hong Kong and mass mobilizations have become frequent, discussions about political events among young people and their peers should increase, and mobilization through peers also should become more probable.

In short, this study suggests that it is important to pay attention to political context when examining the political socialization roles played by schools and peers. Many younger research participants were encouraged to pay attention to politics and social movements because of the introduction of Liberal Studies, and many focus group participants revealed that discussions with peers about major political events and controversies were crucial to their decision to take part in social movement activities. Such findings, therefore, offer support to the argument that the impact of landmark political events in the political socialization process is stronger on people who engage more frequently in interpersonal political communications than others,<sup>44</sup> and on those who are very attentive to information related to landmark events.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Valentino and Sears, "Event-driven Political Communication."

<sup>45</sup> Gimpel et al, *Cultivating Democracy*, 191.

## Suggestions for Further Research

This study also gives rise to several questions worthy of further research. First, because teachers play an important role in socializing students to become social movement supporters or activists, it would be interesting to know how the recently changing political climate in Hong Kong has influenced teachers' decisions to transmit political information and attitudes to their students.

Second, although the participants normally received political information through the Internet, only a small minority explicitly stated that this was important to their political socialization process. However, as shown in many of the quotations in this essay, it was common for the focus group participants to discuss politics or spread political messages through the Internet. Consequently, in future studies, researchers may want to investigate whether the importance of the Internet in the political socialization process lies in its role of lowering the cost of engaging in political discussions with peers.

Third, despite the obvious effect of peer influence, many participants complained that they were unable to mobilize friends to support their causes, meaning that peer influence has limits. As suggested by Klofstad, while peers may influence certain political behaviors such as voting, their ability to change someone's stance is limited.<sup>46</sup> Thus, future studies perhaps should explore what kinds of people and previous experiences help to explain who is more likely to be influenced by political discussions among their peers.<sup>47</sup>

Finally, in the 2012 focus group sessions, two participants, both secondary school students, talked about their experiences of being bullied by schoolmates after the mainstream media showed them joining a political gathering. This suggests that at that time political activism may not have been widely acceptable among secondary school students. Nonetheless, one day after the police force used tear gas against the September 2014 protestors to try to disperse them, secondary school students across Hong Kong took part in class boycotts. At that time, a secondary school teacher told me that she had discovered that one student who had declined to join the boycott felt isolated. In other words, the Umbrella Movement, which surely will have a lasting impact on the political orientation of young people in contemporary Hong Kong, may have made joining prodemocracy protests the new norm among young peer groups.

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<sup>46</sup> Klofstad, *Civic Talk*, 109-125.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 71-89. For example, Klofstad argued that civic talk with peers had a greater influence on those who already were predisposed to participate in civil society.