



CHAPTER 6

Movement Leadership in an Era of Connective Action: A Study of Hong Kong's Student-Led Umbrella Movement

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INTRODUCTION

Leadership is important to social movements. Leaders mobilize followers, identify opportunities, organize logistics, frame dissents, sustain protest momentum, and negotiate with those that they seek to challenge. However, these traditional roles of movement leaders have been questioned by a new wave of social movements that have swept around the world since the early 2010s. From the Arab Spring revolts to the global Occupy Movement to the Spanish Indignados Movement, while protesters demonstrated against economic and political institutions that

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they saw as unjust, undemocratic, or corrupt in their respective contexts, they also eschewed the leadership of traditional movement organizations or political parties and instead valorized decentralized protest structures that emphasized individual participation. Though resembling the leaderless protests commonly seen among new social movements in the 1960s and 1970s, such organizational features were driven not by ideological imperatives but the rise of digital communication technologies. In many of these movements, social media, such as Twitter and Facebook, played a crucial role in mobilizing protesters, framing their grievances, forging collective identities, and organizing logistics—all of which seem to have overshadowed or even replaced the position of movement leaders.

How did the rise of digitally networked protests in physical spaces influence the role of movement leadership? While many scholarly works have looked at how social media facilitate or impede mobilization, much less attention has been paid to its impact on movement leaders and their ability to make strategic decisions in shaping protest trajectories. By studying the student leadership in Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement, this chapter discusses how the protest trajectories were shaped by the complex interplay between movement leaders and the digital and spatial milieus, rather than simply by the presence or absence of political opportunities. First, we show how the digitally enabled and networked protests led to the emergence of many informal leaders, blurring the boundary of leadership, and thinning out the authority of formal leaders. Second, we argue how the student leaders were constrained when making strategic decisions, as they failed to assemble the mandate of the mass from various protest sites and online communities. Our findings demonstrate that the formation of movement leadership and their decision-making capacity can be both adversely affected by digitally networked activism.

The chapter will proceed as follows. We first review the scholarship on movement leadership and those concerning the impact of social media on contentious politics. After establishing the importance to examine the role of leadership in digitally networked protests, we proceed to the case of the Umbrella Movement to analyze (1) how formal student leaders coexisted with informal leaders that had arisen in the digitally and spatially connective milieus; and (2) how they made and legitimized strategic decisions in several critical junctures, responding to the demand of the protestors in both online and offline terrain. We conclude by reflecting on the relationship of movement leaders and participants in contemporary protests.

MOVEMENT LEADERSHIP UNDER CONNECTIVE ACTIONS

Leadership is an understudied area in social movement research. In the extant literature on social movements, despite the recognition on the pivotal role of movement leaders throughout the mobilization process, there is an inherent tendency to relegate leadership to a dependent or indirect variable that merely expresses structural, cultural, or rational imperatives (Aminzade et al., 2001). The emergence and outcome of social movements are often seen as results of political opportunities, shared meanings, or rational calculations, during which leaders play no more than an instrumental role in enforcing these imperatives. On the other hand, social movement literature also tends to work with narrow definitions of leaders. Leaders are typically seen as people who wield authority in movement organizations, those recognized by movement participants or the public as such, or simply those whom movement scholars have judged to be so (DeCesare, 2013).

Research on movement leadership, though limited, has addressed some of these theoretical issues and told us why it deserves attention. First, many of these works have posited that leaders are not merely enforcers of structural, cultural, and rational imperatives. They are instead “powerful pacesetters” that have an independent impact on the course and outcome of social movements (Aminzade et. al, 2001; Barker et al., 2001; Morris & Staggenborg, 2004), which goes beyond that of their charismatic public persona. Leaders played important roles in different stages of the mobilization process. They identify, capture, and even create political opportunities, which are not always easy to spot or readily available (Oberschall, 1973). They create frames to crystallize grievances, attribute blames to specific actors, and offer solutions for problems (Snow et al., 1986). They motivate participants by creating and sustaining collective identities (Melucci, 1996), and by devising media strategies to attract public support. Ganz (2000) argues that leadership matters because it enables movement organizations with poor resources to achieve successful outcomes by utilizing their life experience, networks, and repertoires of collective action. Aminzade et al. (2001) further argue that different types of leadership actions and styles are crucial for mobilizing movements even if structural conditions are ripe and that the variations of these actions and styles can help to explain different movement outcomes. Thus, Morris and Staggenborg (2004) call for the need to examine both the structural

conditions for social movements and how leaders make a difference within the structural contexts.

Second, these studies have significantly expanded the conceptualization of leadership. Leaders are no longer regarded only as those who hold visible, formal positions at movement organizations. Multiple types or levels of leadership often exist. In the Civil Rights Movement, women organizers are found to have played prominent leadership roles though they did not hold formal positions (Barnett, 1993). Robnett (1996) and Herda-Rapp (1998) further show that women served as “bridge leaders” or “informal leaders” that connected movement organizations with local communities, and also existing leaders with potential ones. Ganz (2000) shows the benefits of having what he termed “leadership teams,” which, by combining inside and outside leaders, encourage collaboration and deliberation in movements. To reduce the organizational bias in identifying leaders, DeCesare (2013) calls for an interpretive approach that treats any individual who is perceived as one by any actors as a leader. On the other hand, seeing the difficulty to find a common definition of leaders, Earl (2007) proposes to unpack the concept of leadership by focusing on leadership tasks rather than leaders, which would make comparisons easier.

Although we agree that leaders should be conceptualized more broadly, we disagree with overstretching the conceptual boundary of leaders as abovementioned. Individual leaders—their qualities, style, and choices—still matter considerably. Preserving the analytical category of leaders and demarcating their conceptual boundary helps to examine the impact of their agency. Here, we follow Morris and Staggenborg (2004, 171) to define leaders as “strategic decision-makers who inspire and organize others to participate in social movements,” which have the actual power, recognized by at least a significant group of participants, to make decisions that influence the course and outcomes of movements.

HOW MOVEMENT LEADERSHIP EMERGES AND ACQUIRES AUTHORITY

The importance of leadership opens up a key theoretical puzzle that has yet been adequately addressed: How do leaders emerge in movements? Extant literature has shown that organizational structures, political opportunities, and cultural contexts, all influence the emergence of leaders (Freeman, 1972; Morris & Braine, 2001). However, although these

works provide some answers, it still begs the question of how leaders gain legitimacy from participants. Movement participants are far from an unreflective mass that willingly cedes authority to leaders as they emerge. As Barker et al. (2001, 16) argue, “[t]he ‘elevation’ of individuals and groups into leadership roles is always, in principle, provisional and situational, [...] Leadership as a relationship engages the ‘led’ in constant evaluation, such that their agreement and even simple attention are conditional and inherently fragile.” It is therefore important to examine more closely how they interact with participants in the early stages of social movements.

This points to another question of how leaders maintain authority and exercise their agency to direct movements. This is crucial because movements consist of “segmented contentious entities” (Melucci, 1996) or “heterogeneous participants” (Diani, 2009) from multiple networks. While it is possible that leaders would build bureaucratic and oligarchic organizations that estrange the masses, it is more likely that leaders engage in dissension among themselves and face difficulties in cohering movement participants (Mondros et al., 1994). Factional strife and frame disputes are commonplace, and yet the extant studies have told us little about how leaders resolve conflicts and differences, or how the failure of which can adversely impact movements. Echoing Melucci (1996), Robnett (2013) thus calls for a relational perspective to study movement leadership, which focuses on the relation of power in between leaders and between leaders and participants—namely, how leaders emerge and acquire authority, how different types of leaders coexist, and how they interact with one another as well as with movement participants. Adopting this perspective, leadership is thus a contested and dialectical process, which in turn has an enormous impact on leaders’ strategic decision-making capacity and the outcomes of movements.

MOVEMENT LEADERSHIP IN AN ERA OF CONNECTIVE ACTION

The above theoretical issues deserve greater attention particularly in light of the rise of social media in recent social movements. Characterized by Castells (2015) as “networked social movements,” these protests, which were often triggered spontaneously by indignation, occurred through the hybridity of occupied urban spaces and online social networks, forming a “space of autonomy” that undermine the need for formal leadership. A large body of literature has shown how social media can contribute

to both the mobilization and inhibition of protests (Earl et al., 2013; Earl & Kimport, 2011; Hussain & Howard, 2013; Ogan & Varol, 2017; Theocharis et al., 2015). However, it remains unclear how social media has influenced the role of movement leadership. Bennett and Segerberg tackle this puzzle in *The Logic of Connective Actions* (2013). In this seminal work, the authors characterize the recent wave of digitally enabled protests around the globe as “crowd-enabled connective actions,” which are contrasted with the conventional “organization-centred and brokered collective actions.” The connective action logic is predicated on the adjoining of individual actors and their personalization of frames through social media, which makes it easier for them to participate in protests without strong organizational ties or formal organizations. By activating online and offline networks, digitally enabled connective action can scale up protests and build up repertoires quickly. In contrast, collective action relies on building a shared sense of collective identity frames, a process in which formal organizations and leaders remain central. In between these two action logics lies a hybrid mode, termed as “organizationally led connective actions,” which involves loosely tied networks of organizations that refrain from projecting strong agenda or leadership but instead sponsor multiple actions and invite followers to personalize their engagement on their own terms.

These conceptualizations help to theorize the varying degree to which social media serves as an organizational principle in protest actions. However, while they have opened new theoretical directions for understanding the varied impact of social media on the organizational process of protests, less has been discussed on how these logics coexist and interact in the same action space. As Bennett and Segerberg (2013, 48–49) themselves note, “[i]n reality, the three forms of network organization interact and overlap, and various tensions may arise when they come into conflict.” One common conflict, they note, involves “conventional political organizations deliberately being forced out, being relegated to background roles, or otherwise being marginalized by the crowd” (2013, 49). Indeed, in many recent protests, conventional movement organizations and leadership often coexisted in the same space with offline and online crowds mobilized through the social media. This is particularly the case for protests under authoritarian contexts which sought to promote democratic reforms or topple dictators, where movement organizations and

leaders served an important functional role in devising movement strategies, negotiating with the authorities, or charting the post-revolutionary system.

This brings us back to the relations of power between movement leaders and participants. While participants are not always the loyal and obedient followers of movement leaders, the rise of social media and the connective action logic in social movements have further problematized and distanced their relationship. Given the coexistence of the collective and connective action logics in the same protest space, how do movement leaders interact with the digitally mobilized crowds and their various constituent groups? How do crowds, empowered by the connective logic, affect the formation process of the movement leadership and its decision-making capacity toward achieving movement goals?

STUDENT LEADERSHIP IN HONG KONG UMBRELLA MOVEMENT

Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement in 2014 provides an illustrative case to examine how movement leadership operated within a connective environment. Erupted spontaneously in reaction to police violence, the pro-democracy movement deviated radically from its original plan (proposed by Occupy Central with Love and Peace—hereafter OCLP) and instead became a protracted street occupation. For 79 days, protesters occupied the streets in several city centers, building barricaded tent villages while calling for universal suffrage to elect the city's leader. At first glance, given its physical semblance to the global occupy protests, one may characterize the movement as the manifestation of "connective actions." However, as Lee and Chan (2018) observe, the Umbrella Movement differed from connective actions in two important ways: first, the movement was not entirely spontaneous in that large-scale civil disobedience was pre-announced and carefully planned; second, it had a certain degree of central leadership, a feature of conventional collective actions. Thus, Lee and Chan consider the movement as "a case in which connective actions generated through bottom-up processes intervened into a collective action with central leadership" (2018, 19). In this process, as they observe, "connective actions both empower the movement and generate tensions" (2018, 19).

The interplay between collective and connective actions in the Umbrella Movement provides an interesting case to observe how a formal

movement leadership interacts with digitally connected crowds. Focusing on the student leaders will be particularly useful, since they were leaders on the one hand and active users of social media on the other. To capture these interactive dynamics, this chapter uses process tracing to unpack the interactions between online and offline public opinions and examined when and how does the perceived change in public opinion shape the decision-making process and strategies of movement leaders. Process tracing is “the analysis of evidence on processes, sequences, and conjunctures of events within a case for the purposes of either developing or testing hypotheses about causal mechanisms that might causally explain the case” (Bennett & Checkel, 2014, 9). To do that, we rely on several data sources. First, we conducted participant observations during various episodes of public deliberation between the formal and informal leaders, including onsite mini forums and chit-chatting between organizers and occupants. This was enabled by the fact that one of the authors was a core member of the Hong Kong Federation of Students (HKFS), a leading organization of the movement. He participated in many internal meetings of the leading organizations and was also one the representatives of HKFS in the occupied area of Admiralty. Second, we studied the online opinions that correspond to strategic actions or inactions adopted by the movement leaders. In particular, we focused on the Facebook page of three major leading organizations, namely, HKFS, Scholarism, and OCLP, which served as a communication channel between netizens and the leadership (Lee & Chan, 2018). The authors went through all posts from the three channels and their comments, from 26 September 2014, the very start of the movement, till its end, 15 December 2014. Third, we examined published materials related to the movement, such as press interviews with leaders and their speeches in talks and seminars related to the movement. The inclusion of a variety of sources is intended to provide a rich description of the multifaceted interactions between protest leaders and their constituencies in a connective space, and second, to trace the sequence of decision-making process for verifying our argument.

FORMATION OF THE STUDENT LEADERSHIP UNDER A DECENTRALIZED STRUCTURE

The Umbrella Movement officially began on the night of 28 September 2014, when protesters firmly held their ground against riot police who were instructed to remove them from the streets with tear gas and baton.

Yet, these protesters had been gathering around the government headquarters (GHQ) for two days to call for the release of dozens of students, who were either arrested or detained in a surprise action to storm the GHQ forecourt on 26 September 2014. Despite the firing of tear gas and rumors that the police might deploy live ammunitions, indignant citizens flocked to the streets throughout the night. They also began to occupy other city centers, including Mongkok, Tsim Sha Tsui, and Causeway Bay. By the early hours of 29 September 2014, riot police were forced to withdraw as they were outsize by the defiant crowds.

The improvised protest had gone beyond the highly choreographed plan devised under the OCLP, which merely aimed to occupy one of the streets in Central District for a brief period of time as an act of civil disobedience. The Umbrella Movement, as the protest came to be known, also differed from this campaign in that the street occupation was an entirely improvised and decentralized action, instead of under a central command. Many protesters who poured into the streets regarded themselves as self-mobilized rather than being mobilized by the OCLP campaign, or even any organizations. The slogan “no central command, only the masses,” which later became a *modus operandi* among the protesters, epitomized such sentiments. Many of them had little or no prior protest experience before joining the Movement; they were also not attached to any political parties, traditional social movement organizations (SMOs), or non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Cheng & Chan, 2016; Ma, 2020), which was a phenomenon existed a few years before the Umbrella Movement (Cheng, 2016).

Empowered by digital communication tools, they created digitally and physically connected networks of self-organized groups in the movement spaces through peer-to-peer messengers such as WhatsApp, FireChat, and Telegram. Many informal leaders emerged from the self-organized groups that were mushrooming in the protest site, such as defence teams, supply stations, and first aid stations, which performed a variety of functional roles—patrolling the frontline, negotiating with the police, allocating supplies, clearing garbage, and recruiting volunteers. Meanwhile, protesters also formed online communities through social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, discussion forums, and citizen-based media sites, which facilitated the sharing of real-time information and the expression of diverse political views (Bennett & Segerberg, 2011; Lee & Chan, 2016a, 2016b). These digital tools allowed them to coordinate logistics for resource mobilization and devise innovative

micro-repertoires to sustain the decentralized protests (Cheng & Chan, 2016; Snow & Moss, 2014).

Despite the decentralized dynamics, the Umbrella Movement was by no means leaderless. Two student groups—HKFS and Scholarism—were quickly identified by the media and a significant proportion of protesters as the leaders of the nascent movement (Cheng & Chan, 2016). Both groups were established student organizations, though with different histories and constituencies. The HKFS was founded in 1958 by student unions of local public universities. Over the years, although campus activism was rare except during the 1970s, the HKFS had played an active role in leading Hong Kong's pro-democracy protests and mobilizing university students in the post-handover era. Since the early 2000s, numerous HKFS leaders had been arrested for organizing political protests. Scholarism, on the other hand, was founded in 2011 by a group of teenagers, including the young activist Joshua Wong, to oppose the introduction of a national education curriculum, which culminated in the 2012 Anti-National Education Movement. It was the very first political organization established by secondary school students, who had long been politically inactive under their depoliticized learning environment (Leung & Ng, 2004).

Often regarded as a “pure” and “moral” force, students are often vanguards of activism pioneering social and political changes. This was no different in Hong Kong, where student mobilizations have been common during major protests. The HKFS and Scholarism quickly gained public attention at the beginning of Umbrella Movement due to their mobilization efforts before its outbreak. They launched a trial occupation on 1 July 2014, and a weeklong class boycott from 22 to 26 September 2014. They also took the lead to storm the GHQ, which sparked the Umbrella Movement. In contrast, the three leaders of the OCLP campaign (the Trio) commanded less legitimacy. They were heavily criticized by protesters and netizens for “hiding behind the students” when they arrived in the occupied area near the GHQ on 27 September. They were even accused of “hijacking the student movement,” after they had declared that the OCLP campaign would be launched in the early morning of 28 September (Cheng & Chan, 2016). Many protesters left the protest site subsequently, even though a veteran activist and a lawmaker by then knelt to beg them to stay.

As such, although students only comprised part of the protesters (Cheng & Chan, 2016), the movement was student-led. An onsite survey

conducted by Cheng and Chan (2016) revealed that 56.5% and 29.0% of respondents regarded HKFS and Scholarism as the legitimate leader of the movement respectively, while that of OCLP was only 17.7%. As recalled by Chan Kin-Man, a sociology professor and one of the Trio leaders, HKFS had the veto power among the leading organizations and later became the sole leader (Lam, 28 September 2017) of the movement. This accidental outcome added complication to the interplay between collective and connective actions in the Umbrella Movement. Compared with the older Trio leaders, these young student leaders grew up in the Internet era. They were more familiar with social media and consequently took online opinions more seriously when making strategic decisions.

This, however, did not mean that there was good communication between the student leaders and the informal leaders who were scattered across the occupied sites, especially in the early stage of occupation. To start with, student leaders did not expect the movement would sustain for 79 days. Warned by the government that a further escalation of use-of-force would be possible if the crowd continued to occupy key areas in the city, these leaders devoted most of their time on endless meetings discussing the exigency to avoid a Tiananmen-style crackdown. In such a chaotic situation, they only managed to send a small number of volunteers to station and patrol in the occupied sites. Outnumbered by protesters, these dispatches could hardly gather their voices and redress the grievance of those who felt being abandoned by the formal leaders when student leaders called for a general retreat on 28 September to avoid severe casualties. These student leaders also failed to gather enough support from their constituents. Although Hong Kong's civil society is relatively robust, mobilization from below has long been weak (Lam, 2004; Ma, 2007, 2008). Take the HKFS as an example: it consisted of student unions of eight local universities and was managed by around 30–40 delegates from these unions, representing more than 90,000 college students in Hong Kong. However, the connection between students and student unions were weak.¹ Before the Umbrella Movement, protests initiated by HKFS were often attended by few students (InmediaHK, 3 September 2015). Although they had spent half a year to mobilize their fellow schoolmates

¹ One indicator is that the low voter turnout in the 2013/2014 sessions of these student unions, ranging from 14.1 to 25.3%. And no cabinet run for the election for the student unions of Lingnan University and City University of Hong Kong. Provisional cabinet were appointed by the council of the two student unions.

and form class boycott committees to create momentum for OCLP, these newly established connections and trust later disintegrated when student leaders bargained with the government (Lai, 4 October 2018).

The spontaneous occupation of several city centers resulted in the sudden intervention of connective action logic into a pre-planned collective action, giving rise to a polycentric leadership structure that lasted for the whole movement. Supported by major pro-democracy political parties and many progressive NGOs, the three leading organizations—HKFS, Scholarism, and the OCLP Trio—focused primarily on framing the movement, developing repertoires, and negotiating with the government, serving as the “management board” of the movement (which was later known as the “Five-party Platform”). Their volunteers, self-organized groups, and the informal leaders, in contrast, performed a variety of daily logistical and housekeeping tasks. This division of labor, despite helping to maintain the order in the occupied area amid the suspension of public services (such as removing thrashers), buried the seed for the subsequent stagnation of the movement. The “management board” could not direct protesters as if they were mere followers in classic collective actions. With the connective action logic in play, participants were better regarded as “shareholders” with varying degrees of ownership of the protest. The formal leaders must, therefore, gain the trust and endorsement from the “shareholders” with voting rights—particularly the anonymous informal leaders from numerous self-organized groups and online communities—when they planned any significant strategic moves. In other words, the legitimacy of formal leaders to speak for the movement was not translated directly into their authority to make strategic decisions. Their decision-making power, instead, was contingent upon the support of self-mobilized informal leaders, who saw themselves horizontally connected to the crowds rather than vertically subordinated to the formal leadership. In the meantime, these informal leaders could hardly devise strategic moves for the whole movement. It was not only because they were excluded from the formal leadership but also because they lacked the legitimacy to represent the majority of the protesters.

DIGITAL ACTIVISM AND LEADERSHIP RESPONSES

The student leaders did observe the dynamic of connective action logic at the very beginning. As early as 29 September, HKFS and Scholarism issued a joint statement on their Facebook page (HKFS, 29 September

2014), saying that the two student bodies would “continue to participate and support the spontaneous occupation of citizens,” and “have begun to communicate with citizens in different occupied sites.” In the next few days, the two student organizations, pro-democracy political parties, and many progressive NGOs set up booths in the three occupied sites to show the symbolic presence of formal leadership. They also organized mini forums from time to time to gather the opinion of protesters. The HKFS even formed chit-chat teams to talk with campers during the midnight in mid-October.

The student leaders shifted their focus as of 2 October as the Hong Kong government agreed to engage in a dialogue with the HKFS. Since then, the confrontation had subsided, and they could spend more time and energy on securing gains in the dialogue. However, the “management board” soon discovered that it was not easy to gain the support of their “shareholders.” A series of conflicts epitomized the difficulty. On 3 October, HKFS, Scholarism, and the Trio urged protesters in the Mong Kok occupation zone to retreat after pro-government mobs attacked the encampment there. This call led to a heated debate on their Facebook page and personal account of the formal leaders, attracting thousands of comments. A significant amount of comments criticized these leaders for “abandoning the mass once again” after calling for a general retreat on 28 September. It forced them to withdraw the call within several hours, asking protesters to “stand fast in the currently occupied area” (HKFS, 3 October 2014). Formal leaders also found it hard to persuade protesters to lift the blockage of several passages near the GHQ, when they would like to use this to express their sincerity to negotiate with the government. Many informal leaders regarded the blocked passages as their uncompromisable “properties.” They claimed that student leaders, who had not “shed their blood” to defend the sites, had no legitimacy to force them to leave. Sometimes, even if some of them were convinced, sooner or later, another group of protesters, who had not shown up during the negotiation, would say they were not consulted and had not endorsed the decision.

Even worse, factional strife crept into this dynamic. The localist camp, a pro-democracy faction which advocated to preserve Hong Kong’s identity and autonomy, heavily lampooned the student leaders for having no legitimacy to represent the movement because they had called for a general retreat on 28 September (Wong, 1 October 2014). Chin Wan (1 October 2014a), a leading figure of the camp, called the HKFS an “agent of the

US” (1 October 2014a) and “spy of the (Chinese) communist bandit” (1 October 2014b). On 12 October, HKFS held discussion forums in all three occupied areas, inviting other students to share their thoughts. On his personal Facebook account, Chan (1 October 2014b) rebuked their call as an attempt to reclaim the leadership of the movement and it was “the time of its death,” summoning his followers to obstruct its meeting in Mong Kok. Eventually, the meeting had to be adjourned and became an “interpellation session” of HKFS. They also discredited a few veteran activists and the practice of deliberation by producing flyers and posters and circulating them on Facebook and in the protest sites. Their act created a sense of distrust among moderate and radical protesters and encouraged some protesters to disregard the formal leadership.

LOOKING FOR A WAY OUT

On 21 October, a televised dialogue took place between five representatives of the HKFS and five high-ranking government officials. Protesters, who had been expecting to see weakening signs of the government, watched the dialogue on public screens and through their smartphones with excitement. The leading government officials of the talk, the then Chief Secretary Carrie Lam (the current Chief Executive of Hong Kong) did not make any concession on Hong Kong’s political reform, except agreeing to submit a supplementary report to Beijing to reflect what had happened in Hong Kong and the concerns of different sectors. She also agreed to hold a second-round dialogue and to establish a multiparty discussion platform for post-2017 political reform in Hong Kong. By monitoring online opinion, the HKFS confirmed that their fiery performance was welcomed by the majority, and the response of the government, in contrast, had disgruntled the protestors. Although Lam asked the HKFS to call for an end to the street occupation, the HKFS simply ignore her suggestion. After its representatives returned to the Admiralty camp, each of them went on the stage and took turns to criticize the government for not heeding their demands while calling on protesters to carry on with the occupation.

To further press the government and counter the government’s claim that the movement was losing support, the formal leaders would like to seek public endorsement. The Trio proposed to hold an “occupied area referendum” in Admiralty on 26 October. There were two motions, both of which served as the counterproposal of what the government had

offered. First, in the report to be submitted to Beijing, the Hong Kong government must advise Beijing to withdraw its plan for limited democracy announced earlier on 31 August. Second, the multiparty discussion platform proposed by the government must ensure the genuine suffrage of the Legislative Council (LegCo) in 2016 and the Chief Executive in 2017. If the result of the voting was promising, the leaders could further launch a de-facto referendum by asking pro-democracy lawmakers to resign and initiate a by-election. Immediately after its announcement on 24 October, however, the plan was denounced by many protesters as “Admiralty orientated” (excluding the other two protest sites), redundant (all protesters want genuine suffrage), and risky (may be hijacked by pro-government citizens). In response to these challenges, the formal leadership made several revisions on 25 October. Still, the HKFS and Scholarism observed that these revisions failed to appease the netizens. Thus, in the early morning of 26 October, the two student bodies pressed the Trio to halt the plan. Soon after the meeting, the formal leaders announced that the voting would be called off and apologized for their immature planning. This incident suggested that the coexistence of the logic of connective and collective action not only would constrain the decision-making capacities of the formal leadership but would also create splits among the formal leadership. In a later interview, Chan Kin-Man believed that student leaders were too heavily influenced by online opinion, which made it hard for them to make strategic moves (Lam, 28 September 2017). Since then, the Trio decided to fade out from the movement, and the Trio leaders, Chan Kin-Man and Benny Tai, resumed their teaching duties in late October.

After the voting was cancelled, the two student bodies continued to persuade the pan-democrats to support the de-facto referendum. Their rationale and logic were simple. If five pan-democrat legislators (each from one of the five geographical constituencies) resign, it would trigger a Hong Kong-wide by-election, which could serve as an opinion poll reflecting the positions of the Hong Kong citizens on the movement. If pan-democratic candidates won, it would legitimize the movement and press the government to concede. Also, protesters could spend their energy on promoting the rationale of the movement at the community level, instead of wandering in the occupied sites and debating with each other endlessly on the Internet (Wong, 3 November 2014a). Again, this idea did not materialize after weeks of discussion. Pan-democrats and some protesters reckoned this as a risky move because the pan-democrats

would lose their veto power in the LegCo if they lost the by-election. The two student bodies counter-proposed to trigger the referendum by asking one pan-democrat legislator from the District Council functional constituency to resign, which would allow a majority of voters to cast their votes without risking the loss of veto power. However, the pan-democrats requested the two student bodies to call for an end of the occupation in return, to which they objected. In the meantime, several other attempts of the HKFS failed. The HKFS wrote an open letter to Carrie Lam on 28 October for a second dialogue. It also asked her and two other pro-Beijing politicians to arrange a direct dialogue with the Beijing leaders. With no positive response from any of them, the HKFS wrote another open letter to Premier Li Keqiang and decided to send three representatives to Beijing the day after. Nonetheless, their travel permit to China was annulled by the Chinese authority when they arrived at the Hong Kong airport and were barred from boarding.

These failures frustrated the radical wing of the protesters, who saw the moderate approach of the formal leadership as a sign of being incapable. In the hope of ending the stalemate, agitated protesters began to float the idea of escalation. On 18 November, a netizen wrote on Golden Forum, a popular Internet chatroom, that the LegCo would debate an Internet copyright law, which was widely believed to curtail the freedom of expression and urged others to surround the building on the next day. The post received more than a thousand responses, with some opposing the action and others supporting it. On that night at around 9 pm, masked protesters began to gather at the LegCo in response to the call. Some of them asked the main stage at Admiralty to make a public announcement on escalating the protest but the marshal team opposed them. Nevertheless, the action went ahead as protesters broke the front glass door of the LegCo. Many were arrested after the incident. Some of these militant protesters attributed this failure to the inaction of the main stage and vehemently attacked the marshal team on Facebook for denying them the opportunity to make their voices heard. On the following few days, hundreds of them gathered at Admiralty and protested against the main stage. They called for the disbanding of the marshal team and demanded the two student organizations to take the lead to escalate the protest.

Meanwhile, the regime adopted proactive tactics to ignore the demands of the HKFS and wait out the protests (Yuen & Cheng, 2017). At the same time, pro-government elites and businessmen attempted to delegitimize the movement by mobilizing countermovement and filing

court injunctions to clear the occupied sites. Embracing the principle of civil disobedience, the student leaders find it too hard to obstruct the court order, leading to the eviction of the Mong Kok protest site on 25 November 2014 with little resistance. The stalemate pressed the two student bodies to escalate the protest, in response to thousands of comments on their Facebookpage in the next few days (Ho, 17 January 2015). As Alex Chow, Secretary General of HKFS, (InmediaHK, 3 September 2015) put it, “we had no more card to play” when “protester became increasingly anxious and there was no room for further dialogue (with the government).” In the next few days, the HKFS and Scholarism jointly announced an “action finale,” calling protesters to surround the Chief Executive office on 30 November. Despite drawing much attention, the action turned out to be a disaster. Without any strategies or coordination, hundreds of protesters who echoed the call were dispersed by the police by pepper sprays and baton. Many were injured and at least 40 of them were arrested by midnight.

THE END OF THE UMBRELLA MOVEMENT AND ITS RIPPLES

The failure of the “action finale” was disastrous to the movement. The incompetence of the two student organizations disgruntled many protesters and informal leaders in Admiralty, many of which were friendly with them. On the next day, angry protesters and informal leaders removed all barricades of the main stage in Admiralty to express their outrage toward the two student bodies. This event symbolized the complete disarticulation of the protest. To rescue the movement, Joshua Wong and a few members of Scholarism began a hunger strike on the same day, hoping to urge the government to hold another dialogue with the student leaders. The government simply ignored their demand. To fulfil the moral responsibility of civil disobedience, the Trio, in contrast, asked their followers to surrender to the police with them. Their action could not stop the court’s injunction order and the complete crackdown of the two remaining occupied sites of Admiralty and Causeway Bay. Eventually, the two sites were cleared on 11 December and 15 December, marking the end of the Umbrella Movement.

The Umbrella Movement ended with severe repercussions. Radical protesters, many of which were college students, were vexed by the inept leadership of the two student organizations, which they blamed for the direct failure of the movement and the heavy casualties on 30

November. They were further enraged when a misinterpretation of Alex Chow's quote on Facebook, which purported that the "action finale" on 30 November was purposively mis-planned to demonstrate the ineffectiveness of further escalation. In the following spring semester, under the request of these enraged college students, five university student unions organized referenda to decide whether to remain or leave the HKFS. Four out of five of these student unions decided to leave, including that of the University of Hong Kong, a founding member of the HKFS. That is to say, ironically, HKFS, the most institutionalized leading organization of the movement, was being held accountable because of its incompetent leadership in movement heavily influenced by the connective action logic. More illustratively, the exit campaign itself was facilitated by this very logic. In fact, many exit campaigners were informal leader of the movement who could micro-mobilize their fellows. Some of them had even assisted the HKFS since the pre-movement class boycott (Yan, 25 April 2015). Besides, these exit campaigns were facilitated by social media and were heavily sponsored by online media, such as Passion Times and VJ media, whose member also took part in drumming up these exit campaigns (Mingpao, 17 February 2015).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This chapter adopted a relational perspective with the objective to understand how social movement leaders maintain authority and strategize under a connective protest environment. Through the case of Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement, we argue that while the connective dynamics enabled by social media had helped to sustain the mobilization of pro-democracy protesters on a massive scale, it also produced a large number of informal leaders from the crowds who thinned out the authority of formal leaders during the mobilization process. As the street occupation lingered on, decisions of the formal leaders were increasingly constrained by activities and sentiments on social media platforms. This became obvious as student leaders began to come up with strategies to end the street occupation after seeing the diminishing chances of gaining government concessions and the decline in public support. Ironically, despite their objective to create conditions for retreat, these efforts inadvertently boomeranged toward the direction of escalation. During this process, formal leaders faced constant challenges from the digitally connected protest crowds and the informal leaders, which constrained

their options as they sought to maintain their support. The challenges were often mounted by movement radicals who might not appreciate the threats in the field and the difficulties in negotiating with the local government. Although these online opinion leaders and their onsite supporters might have lacked decision-making legitimacy, they enjoyed a veto power that was conferred to them through the connective protest logic. As both parties lack the capability to direct the movement, stalemate was inevitable when the government adopted a strategy of attrition.

Our findings highlight the importance of revisiting leadership dynamics of social movements in the Internet era. Although leaders have maintained their relevance in the digitally enabled protests today, their relationship with protesters have changed radically. Movement leaders are no longer “commanders” of protesters who follow their orders. They serve more as the “management board” with the protesters being their “shareholders” who constantly question their legitimacy and have the ability to veto their decisions. Therefore, movement leadership and its organizational, spatial, and temporal dynamics should be seen as an interweaving process. This process constrains movement leaders’ available options and shapes their perception of legitimate constituencies, which seems to be more relational and contingent than the mainstream literature has suggested. It also suggests that trajectories of protest in the contemporary era cannot be explained simply by the presence or absence of political opportunities but must be understood through looking at the complex interplays between movement leadership, informal leaders, ordinary protesters, and the digital as well as spatial milieus over time.

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