

## *Rethinking Contentious Politics in Hong Kong: Change and Continuity*

Samson Yuen and Edmund W. Cheng

### ***Abstract***

Despite sustaining enviable economic growth after its Handover to China, Hong Kong has witnessed an increasingly contentious society where citizens have continued to protest for their political freedoms. This article is an attempt to rethink the ways of studying popular contention in a subnational, hybrid context, focusing on the case of Hong Kong. How has Hong Kong's long trajectory of popular protests, despite not being able to bring about institutional changes, reshaped the dynamics and contours of political participation? Departing from what we will identify as the structural–functionalist and neo-institutionalist approaches, we propose to deploy a bottom–up, movement-oriented approach—what we call the “movement field” approach—to identify how state, non-state and quasi-state actors interact to operate between different issues of activism, adopt various contentious practices, and transcend established boundaries of contention. We aim to identify new analytical levers for revealing the neglected dimensions of the city's contentious politics and for identifying the interplay between their changes and continuities. Our aim is to reveal the impetus and mechanisms for social-political changes in an open society dictated by increasingly authoritarian protocols, and to offer new conceptual and methodological directions that might yield a more profound and nuanced understanding of contentious politics both in and beyond Hong Kong.

Since its Handover in 1997, Hong Kong has been fraught with a strange paradox. The Special Administrative Region (SAR), designated under Chinese sovereignty but self-governed by the formula of “One Country, Two Systems,” has continued to thrive economically. It has enjoyed enviable economic growth and basic social stability while maintaining its position as a global financial powerhouse as well as a connector between China and the rest of the world. Yet parallel to this official narrative of success is a more raucous story, one punctuated by episodes of mass protests that aimed to reveal deepening social inequalities and to challenge the governance and legitimacy of the SAR government. This counter-narrative often begins with the July 1 rally in 2003, when over half a million people marched against the national security legislation. The story continues with an energized pro-democracy movement and the diffusion of bottom–up activism across a spectrum of issues, including heritage preservation, land redevelopment, public space, mega-projects, national education and

press freedom. Popular contention, rather than stability and prosperity, constitutes the heart of this parallel narrative.

This familiarity with mass protests did not seem to lessen the surprises when the Occupy Central campaign erupted in September 2014. Calling for the implementation of universal suffrage for the election of the Chief Executive, the pro-democracy campaign deviated from its original script and gave way to an improvised occupation protest that transformed several city centers into tent villages for two and a half months, during which more than a million people participated. These remarkable features became what was known as the Umbrella Movement, a major social protest of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It thoroughly showcased people's power while putting the city in the global spotlight as if to remind the world of the political existence of this unique territory after the 1997 Handover (Wu). However, despite marking the apogee of Hong Kong's protracted struggle for democracy, the Umbrella Movement seemed to have merely entrenched the very paradox underlying "One Country, Two Systems." Its failure to gain any meaningful concessions suggests that although the semi-autonomous city would continue to enjoy economic prosperity along with some degree of civil liberties, genuine democracy would remain a distant prospect.

Nevertheless, by introducing new protest frames and repertoires, altering practices of political participation and provoking proactive regime responses (E. W. Cheng, "Street Politics"; Yuen and Cheng, "Neither"), the Umbrella Movement has spurred new possibilities to reimagine the roadmap and contours of Hong Kong's contentious politics, allowing observers to transcend existing analytical angles and encourage cross-disciplinary dialogues. This article is an attempt to rethink the ways of studying popular contention in Hong Kong. Departing from what we will identify as the structural-functional and neo-institutionalist approaches, we propose to deploy a bottom-up, movement-oriented approach—what we call the "movement field" approach—to identify how state, non-state and quasi-state actors interact to operate between different issues of activism, adopt various contentious practices, and transcend established boundaries of contention. We ask the following key question: How has Hong Kong's long trajectory of popular protests, despite not being able to bring about institutional changes, reshaped the dynamics and contours of political participation? By centering our inquiry on this question, we aim to identify new analytical levers for revealing the neglected dimensions of the city's contentious politics and for identifying the interplay between their changes and continuities. Our aim is therefore twofold: to reveal the impetus and mechanisms for social-political changes in an open society dictated by increasingly authoritarian protocol and to offer new conceptual and methodological directions that might yield a different—

hopefully more profound and nuanced—understanding of contentious politics both in and beyond Hong Kong.

## **The Study of Hong Kong's Contentious Politics**

Contentious politics in post-Handover Hong Kong has long been a subject of interest among journalists, diplomats and scholars. Having become a liberal enclave within authoritarian China, Hong Kong was once regarded as a precursor of democracy and an agent of democratization in the reform-in-progress communist regime (Carroll 2–5; Hung and Ip, “Hong Kong’s”). But as China’s rapid economic rise eclipsed the prospect of implementing democratic reforms, attention on Hong Kong shifted inwards to the struggles of its civil society to democratize the semi-autonomous political system while defending against the state’s authoritarian advances. Observers have witnessed the rising number, scale and intensity of popular contention, describing Hong Kong as a “city of protests.” Although such contention tends to remain civic and orderly, forming a stark contrast with protests in many other contexts (even democratic regimes), their resilience as well as juxtaposition with the city’s appearance of economic prosperity continues to attract curiosity and attention.

Scholarly works have generally followed three research approaches in studying Hong Kong’s contentious politics. The first one—which we term the structural–functionalist approach—seeks to characterize citizens’ mode of political participation under a set of socioeconomic, cultural and political conditions that work together to reinforce stability. This approach has generated a research agenda that aims to explain the causes and patterns of social equilibrium rather than being interested in mapping social changes (See Burawoy, “The Critical Turn”). One of the earliest and most influential works underpinning this approach is Lau, who argues that citizens during the colonial era were politically apathetic owing to the dominance of their utilitarian and familial interests, which contributed to the political stability of colonial rule (13–14, 72–75). This notion of utilitarian and minimal participation has been challenged by scholars who point to various episodes of activism and voluntarism throughout the colonial era (Degolyer and Scott 68–78). Most definitively, Lam Wai-man argues that the nature of Hong Kong politics is the paradoxical “combination of political activism and a culture of depoliticization” (26–27). This sphere of political activism continued to expand after the transfer of sovereignty in 1997, leading to the emergence of a “political society” (Kuan, “Escape”). It also turned citizens from “attentive spectators” (Lau and Kuan 3–24) into “attentive analysts and occasional activists” (Lee and Chan, “Making Sense of Participation” 84–101) and “liberal patriots” (E. Chan and J. Chan 952–70), who tend to self-mobilize during critical times to exercise civil liberties but fall short of seeking systemic changes (Chiu and Lui 2–5).

The second approach—which we term the neo-institutionalist approach—aims to study how institutions interact with agents and provide explanations for the rising social contention by pointing to the form of political system or bureaucratic practices (See Hall and Taylor 936–57). This approach has produced a research agenda that aims to identify the political opportunity structure that is capable of absorbing dissent or giving rise to it. Compared with the functionalists, the institutionalists are more attentive to the process of (institutional) changes. Pioneering such an approach is King, who attributes the political stability enjoyed by the colonial state to its “administrative absorption of politics” (422–39), which led to generally positive interactions between the consultative state, pressure groups (Lui 149–73) and, later, political parties (Sing, “Mobilization”). This institutional lens, however, told a different story after the 1997 Handover. Riding through the tides of the Asian Financial Crisis, the SARS epidemic and the Article 23 legislation, the SAR government was said to be plagued by governance crises (Lui and Chiu 1–34; Chan and So, *Crisis*). Observers point to various factors underlying this crisis-provoking politics, including the lack of democratic reforms, which results in declining government legitimacy (Ma, *Political*; Sing, “The Legitimacy Problem”); the institutional disarticulation between different branches of government (I. Scott 29–31) that leads to policy impasses (Cheung 135–67); an eclectic corporatist system before and after the Handover that encourages government-business collusion (Ma, “The Making”); and the increasingly overt political interventions from the central government that shape a growing authoritarian state (Fong 854–82). These institutional weaknesses and erosion were seen as sources of political opportunities that fueled mass mobilization (Ortmann 14–25) and the radicalization of politics (J. Y. S. Cheng 199–232).

These two approaches have certainly deepened our understanding of the nature and causes of local contention, but they have also suffered from limitations. To begin with, the structural–functionalist approach tends to essentialize citizens’ mode of political participation and congeal it into a particular form of political subjectivity, such as “attentive spectators” or “occasional activists.” These reified, ideal-type subjectivities tend to generalize about citizens’ political behavior and underestimate their capacity to deviate from the prescribed roles. Although works following this approach have delineated a growing trend of political consciousness and participation, the fundamental assumption remains the same as these subjectivities are considered the structural products of the surrounding conditions. It will downplay the complexity of citizens’ political agency and the fact that it can be shaped not only by background societal conditions but also *through* episodes of contention.

The neo-institutionalist approach, on the other hand, treats popular contention as crises of governance that result from dysfunctional

institutions and their lack of legitimacy. The latter is seen as the source of political opportunities, while mass mobilizations are the societal reflexes towards such opportunities aiming to address the institutional problems. This perspective, however, undermines the indispensable role of political actors (state or non-state) in the attribution of threats and opportunities, which is crucial to mediating the emergence of mobilization (McAdam et al., *Dynamics*). It also neglects the power of contingency and transformative events in triggering mobilization, especially in the absence of political opportunities (Snow et al. 1122–43). Moreover, in some of the works adopting this approach, there is an implicit tendency to problematize popular contention as “crises,” which are expected to be solved in order to restore good governance.

But even when these two approaches are supplemented with each other to produce a more holistic assessment, what typically results is a chronicle of action and response between a semi-authoritarian state on the one hand and an active but self-defensive civil society on the other. The analyses are often based on events that provide political opportunities for mobilization (such as the Article 23 legislation), focusing on their chronological flow (a what-follows-what approach) and the role of elite actors shortly before and during such events. The findings, therefore, tend to be heavily descriptive and deeply contextual, while explanations are often attributed to Hong Kong’s conservative political culture and hybrid political system. This system not only constrains the understanding of the dynamic nature of contention but also hampers cross-disciplinary dialogues as well as cross-national comparisons.

### **The Dynamics of Contention Approach**

In light of these theoretical shortcomings, a third approach has been explored in more recent studies. This approach seeks to temper the structural bias of the political process model (McAdam et al., *Comparative Perspectives*; Tarrow, *Power in Movement*), which has inspired works in the neo-institutionalist approach, by giving greater salience to the role of agency and by underscoring the dynamic nature of the mobilization process. In their path-breaking *Dynamics of Contention*, McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly outline this approach by focusing less on structural explanations (i.e., the necessary and sufficient conditions for mobilization) and instead identifying the recurrent causal mechanisms, as well as their combinations and sequences, that drive the mobilization and demobilization process in different instances of social contention. Political actors play an important role in these mechanisms by attributing threats and opportunities, creating mobilizing structures and appropriating existing ones. By emphasizing agency, this approach helps to inject more dynamism into the mechanistic political process model.

The dynamics of contention approach has rectified the deterministic tendency of the structural–functionalist and neo-institutionalist approaches in analyzing Hong Kong’s contentious politics. In their study of the annual July 1 rallies, Lee and Chan adopt this third approach by emphasizing the “dynamic and contingent interplay among various factors and actors” (*Media* 8). Ku also recognized that protests in or for the public sphere had dramatized the impact of democratic struggle against the hegemonic neoliberal order in Hong Kong society (“The ‘Public’”). Ma further emphasized that this plebeian experience played a major part in transmitting value changes and transforming political subjects (“Value”). Through this framework, they identify “self-mobilization” as a key mobilization mechanism in Hong Kong’s mass protests. However, despite being able to explain the mobilization process more thoroughly, the approach has two major problems that discourage us from adopting it in a wholesale manner. First, although the framework vows to pay more attention to agency, it has an implicit bias towards particular dimensions of agency—strategic, instrumental or cognitive—while downplaying others, such as emotional, expressive or cultural dimensions. The role of political actors is expected to be purposive and ends-oriented: to capitalize on threats and opportunities, to transform mobilizing structures and to create mobilization frames. To exemplify with the case of the Umbrella Movement, this framework would attribute the unexpected large-scale mobilization to the emotional reactions of self-mobilizing citizens in the face of state repression (Cheng and Chan 228). This view assumes that the impetus to mobilize came from, as Goodwin and Jasper put it, “a relatively instrumental reading of available information about the state’s willingness to repress dissent” (413–32). In other words, it expects citizens to react to certain cognitive cues but does not explain the more important question of *why* they would react to them (i.e., why do citizens mobilize in response to the firing of tear gas?), which often involves complex emotional and cultural factors that are not always conscious to the actors. In this sense, agency is merely absorbed into the structure to become part of it. The structural bias of the political process model is merely disguised but not eliminated.

Second, by focusing on the causal mechanisms that drive the process of mobilization and demobilization, this approach neglects the *lateral* dimensions of social contention—such as identity, space, art and religion—that are crucial but might not have immediate and measurable causal impact. To use the example of the Umbrella Movement again, the dynamics of contention framework would likely collapse these factors under “repertoires” or “cultural framings” and seek to evaluate their impact in the process of (de)mobilization. For instance, such an approach might regard the spread of the occupation protest to various locations as a key factor in sustaining mobilization. Despite being a legitimate explanation, such a focus on identifying causal logics would

inadvertently downplay the role of space in forging new collective identities, creating political metaphors or shaping the parameters of future contention, which do not necessarily exert noticeable impact on the existing contention. Moreover, by placing the emphasis on episodes of physical mobilization, this approach also tends to neglect less conspicuous forms of contention that permeate everyday life, such as identity politics or community activism. These mundane or latent forms of contention are difficult to detect and are not necessarily the immediate causes of mass mobilization. Yet, they do play a crucial role in shaping the social and cultural habitat in which the latter occur.

To be sure, our goal in this article is not to offer a general theory of contention that reconciles the dynamics of contention framework with the conceptual criticisms—such a task is not only overly ambitious but also nearly impossible. Instead, our objective is to calibrate the framework for analyzing Hong Kong’s contentious politics that better balances the structural and agency approach and that brings closer the explanatory and interpretive tradition. While we intend to continue previous scholarly efforts to explain the mobilization and demobilization process of contention, we also aim to delineate the socio-political changes and continuities that transpire through contentious politics while seeking to explore beyond conventional lens.

## **A “Movement Field” Approach**

We borrow Pierre Bourdieu’s sociological notion of “field” to conceptualize contentious politics as a “movement field,” given our belief that its theorization of the relationship between structure and agency has powerful interdisciplinary implications. It takes historical context and the biographical cycle of agencies seriously, and invites us to conceive the evolution of power as contingent and multidimensional. In the words of Bourdieu,

A field is a field of forces within which agents occupy positions that statistically determine the positions they take with respect to the field, these determine the positions they take with respect to the field, these position-takings being aimed either at conserving or transforming the structure of relations of forces that is constitutive of the field. (30)

Fields are thus arenas of social life that host the production, circulation, competition and exchange of different kinds of capital, such as goods, services, knowledge or status. In a field, actors compete over the distribution of this capital as well as the power to define it as such. In doing so, individuals are not only constrained by the set of rules governing that field but also driven by their embedded dispositions—which are shaped by the interplay between their credentials (e.g., class,

education, beliefs and skills) and past actions and which determine their positions in that field relative to one another. Conceived as such, individuals' actions and behavior thus embody both agency and structure, involving a certain degree of free will while being influenced by forces of the field unaware to them. Such actions (what Bourdieu calls position-takings) are likely to conserve the field and its rules when individual dispositions go along smoothly with the field. However, when discrepancies exist, conflicts might arise—and there is a chance that the field could be transformed to regain equilibrium.

Contentious politics, in essence, operates like a field. Structured by its own norms and rules, this “movement field” consists of a constellation of actors—state actors, non-state actors and quasi-state actors—that occupy different positions and interact with one another to compete for valued capital surrounding social and political issues. In the hope of transforming the field to their advantages, these actors behave and strategize with respect to threats and opportunities, create and appropriate mobilizing structures, and deploy repertoires and frames to make contentious claims on others—in very much the same way as in the dynamics of contention framework. Yet, the notion of “movement field” enables us to dive deeper than that framework in two ways. First, it goes beyond the dichotomous distinction between agency and structure that seeks to draw an unambiguous line between them and instead conceives contentious actions as the interplay of both. Thus, such actions are not separate from the structure—they express structure in certain ways while seeking to either preserve or transform it. The implication is that analysts must pay greater attention to political actors, not just how they make use of structural openings but also how their agencies are being shaped by structures and how these actions preserve or transform them. Second, the field approach allows us to conceptualize social changes in a more subtle manner. Social changes are not necessarily conspicuous in the form of policy or institutional changes, as is typically expected under the dynamics of contention framework. Under the “movement field” perspective, these changes can occur through the changes in individual and collective dispositions that structure the field and drive actors' future behaviors even without altering the underlying rules. They can also occur through the expansion of the field to new sites of contention or the creation of new contentious practices, which help to generate more opportunities for potential transformation.

This abstract discussion lays a conceptual foundation for us to propose new ways for studying Hong Kong's contentious politics. In the following, we identify three heuristic dimensions of the “movement field” as possible levers of analysis.



### Discourses

Discourses are the discursive ideas, frames and resources with which “movement field” actors deploy and by which they are influenced when making contentious claims on others. In the study of Hong Kong’s contentious politics, however, scholars typically analyze popular contention based on the issues that underpin their emergence. Issues—ranging from constitutional reform to the construction of mega-projects—provide the political opportunities and the frames for actors to mobilize contentious actions. The analytical focus is often about how these issues trigger contention but rarely about why those particular issues were touched on and what they meant for contentious politics.

The “movement field” approach allows us to reveal the significance of contentious issues through shedding light on the discourse in which those issues are embedded. To borrow Marxist terminology, discourse is the “base structure” and issues as the “superstructure” that grows out of it. How does the underlying discourse give salience to or inspire particular issues, and how do the issues in turn transform the discourse, regardless of whether there are policy or institutional changes? One example to illustrate this dimension in Hong Kong’s context is the “fear of communism” (恐共 *konggong*), a key discourse that has developed since the 1950s, when political turmoil in mainland China brought a mass influx of immigrants and refugees. Developing through events such as the Sino-British negotiations on Hong Kong’s future in 1982–1984 and the June 4 crackdown of the Tiananmen Movement, the discourse has been deeply entrenched as a core part of the political psychology among the local populace, fueling a strong distrust of the Chinese communist authorities. Attending to this discourse is thus a crucial task for understanding why seemingly unrelated issues—such as the national security legislation, express rail-link with mainland China, and national education—provide the political opportunities and the aligning frames for mass mobilization. Equally important is to examine how such discourse develops *through* these issues—that is, how it gains elements and how certain elements strengthen or weaken—to gauge which issues are prone to contention.

Another example is to look at the emergence and development of “localism” (本土 *bentū*) through various issues of contention. This notion, which has by now become an important strand of thought in local politics, was born amidst the heritage preservation movements between 2005 and 2007. Although these movements eventually failed to preserve the featured heritage sites, including the Star Ferry Pier and the Queen’s Pier, they did establish and define “localism” as a value that sheds light on the social importance of dramaturgical representations and public spaces (Ku, “Making” 382), influences governmental practices and even leads to the creation of new agencies. More importantly, the citizens’ identity discourse has reflected growing contractions between their traditional pan-Chinese cultural

identification and their ethnic-based or civic-based distinctiveness (Veg, “The Rise” 323).

This meaning-making process has profound implications for subsequent episodes of contention, in which actors—activists, state, and citizens alike—would either strategically or inadvertently address and reference the notion and its associated vocabularies in framing the issues at hand. In the 2009–2010 Anti-Express Rail Link Movement, one impetus that fueled the protests was the preservation of Choi Yuen Village. Facing the fate of demolition, this previously unknown rural community was framed as a valued way of local life battling against the encroachment of corporate and political interests (Xia, “Collective”). Even the government was compelled to respond to the discourse of localism. This was evidenced by how ideas of conservation have not only been injected into the official rhetoric, but also articulated in public policy-making, especially with regards to urban planning and heritage preservation. Examples include the institutionalization of a heritage revitalization scheme that seeks to take into account both historical values and community lived experiences (Cheng and Ma 511–28), as well as the preservation of specific heritage sights such as King Yin Lei and the Central Police Station Compound, which would have created enormous land revenues if they were demolished for redevelopment purposes (Ku, “Making”).

The result is that the underlying notion of “localism” has become firmly ingrained in the “movement field” and had become too important to be neglected by different actors. New political agencies have also emerged, including issue-based groups such as Local Action, Land Justice League and Liber Research Community; professional groups such as Progressive Lawyers Group and Médecins Inspirés; and community-based groups such as Community Cultural Concern and Fixing Hong Kong. It is therefore not surprising to see how subsequent contentious episodes continued to refer to the notion while seeking to define it in new ways—such as advocating for the protection of local interests and identity (Kaeding, “Rise”). Without understanding the process of cultural reproduction that gives rise to an alternative imagination of the city and its subject, one cannot explain why certain seemingly trivial issues are prone to contention and why contentious politics evolves in one direction rather than others.

### *Spaces*

Space is the physical or virtual place where contentious politics occur and from which they can be observed. Existing studies of Hong Kong’s popular contention, owing to their focus on the structural and institutional causes, do not put much analytical weight on the role of space. Their attention is mostly focused on highly visible contentious spaces, namely, streets and prominent public spaces, which are typically seen as the containers of activism that exist outside of political

institutions. This view inevitably downplays the role of space in shaping the contours and boundaries of contentious politics, as well as the importance of less visible spaces, such as social media, grassroots neighborhoods and workplaces (Ku, “The ‘Public’”; Chan, Chan, and Tang, “Reflecting”). By contrast, the “movement field” approach seeks to shed more analytical light on contentious spaces—the way they shape and are shaped by popular contention. This approach considers them not merely as the physical sites for mobilization but more so as historically, socially and culturally constituted spaces that can be shaped by contentious actions while also giving meaning to them. This implies that spaces in a movement field are not fixed. They can be created anew or brought to connect with others. The boundaries of such spaces can expand or contract.

Contentious politics in Hong Kong offers ample evidence to illustrate the significance of space. For a long time and continuing to the present, streets and, at times, public parks have been the main stage of popular contention for Hong Kong citizens, with mass demonstrations such as the July 1 protests and the June 4 candlelight vigil held on a regular basis. These episodes of contention are typically confined within designated spaces that are preselected by protest organizers and made known to the state authorities. Since the mid-2000s, however, the emergence of the heritage preservation movements has spawned new spatial strategies of contention in which activists stage direct actions to occupy cultural heritages and public spaces that are unaccustomed to protest activities. However, these actions do not end with giving meaning to the contentious spaces; more importantly, they help to make “public spaces” genuinely public while inspiring new contentious practices (a separate subject for discussion below) and similar kinds of actions. For instance, during the Anti-National Education Movement in 2012, student activists occupied the forecourt of the government headquarters for a week to protest against the government’s plan to implement patriotic education, and they named that space “Civic Square.” Two years later, in September 2014, “Civic Square,” which had been cordoned off with high metal fences, became the place to launch the Occupy Central movement after activists were arrested for storming the space. This event also sparked the subsequent Umbrella Movement, which evolved into a cluster of improvised occupation protests transforming various urban thoroughfares into tent villages. From these examples, one can observe how contentious spaces not only served as the containers of activism but also played a crucial role in establishing meanings, shaping collective identities and breaking established social and political boundaries (E. Cheng and Chan 222–39).

Under the “movement field” approach, contentious spaces are not limited to physical locations such as streets, cultural sites or public squares. They have been extended into political institutions that are

typically conceived as realms of policy-making or judicial proceedings, of which contention occurs only outside rather than inside. In recent years, the Legislative Council, owing to its institutional deficiencies, has become a contentious space where pro-democracy politicians stage protests against government officials through televised policy debates and through which they use it as a resource platform to mobilize mass protests. The same can be said of the courts, which have recently seen a trend of increasing politicization—while the activists have taken the legal route, such as judicial reviews, to assert their rights, the government has also used the laws to prosecute activists and restrain political activities. Meanwhile, transnational activism that occurs on foreign soil but is known to local audiences through social media and television also opens up learning spaces for emulating foreign contentious practices. Both the anti-WTO protests and Taiwan's Sunflower Movement of 2014 served as important references for local activists in the heritage preservation movements and the Umbrella Movement, respectively.

Contention has also spread to various quotidian spaces. Social media is a pertinent example. As a digital space, it has served as an interactive platform for the uninterrupted exchange and diffusion of ideas, creating a plethora of digitally imagined communities that not only engage in offline mobilization during critical times but also remain constantly active online. Bennett and Segerberg have described this kind of digitally enabled contention as “connective actions” to distinguish it from the more conventional form of collective actions (“Logic”). As the hybrid product of digital and physical space, “connective actions” were highly salient in recent protests such as the Anti-National Education Movement and the Umbrella Movement, where digital activists sought to stage mobilization and influence its course through social media (Lee and Chan, “Digital”; Chan and Fu, “The Relationship”). Even after these episodes of mobilization, contention has continued to occur online, visible in digital realms such as Facebook pages, chatrooms, bulletins and Internet radio stations.

Another example of quotidian space is grassroots neighborhoods. After the Umbrella Movement, pro-democracy activists, who have encountered the limits of mass protests in bringing about institutional changes, have organized community-based groups in grassroots neighborhoods in order to promote democratic values and practices in the form of “everyday resistance” (J. Scott xvi–xvii). By engaging citizens from the bottom up on an everyday basis, these community movements aim not only at winning local elections for pro-democracy candidates but also at providing new tools for the weak. In sum, the “movement field” encompasses a broader range of contentious spaces—institutional and non-institutional, visible and less visible, eventful and quotidian. Their interaction and connectivity are emphasized, with the

aim of understanding how their interplay shapes the changing landscape of contentious politics.

### *Practices*

Practices are the acts or forms of contention through which actors make claims on others in order to gain valued capital. In the study of Hong Kong's contentious politics, analysts have typically focused on rallies and demonstrations as the prevalent forms of contention—more often known as “repertoires” in the language of the political process model. These repertoires are considered the default modes of expressing dissent, which is determined by the underlying social context, and they vary only slightly depending on the space that hosts the contention. Why these repertoires are chosen or adopted, however, is seldom the subject of analysis. As such, these analyses might neglect to consider why contention manifests in forms that deviate from conventional ones when they do, what meanings they give to the contention, and where new forms reproduce older ones as well as where they break with the latter. Such a view might also obscure the individualistic acts of contention veiled under the blanket of collective actions.

The “movement field” approach employs the more general notion of “practices” to shed light on the embedded and often complex meanings of contentious acts at both the collective and individual levels. Practices are not necessarily strategic and calculated means of claims-making—they can be performative or expressive, as Charles Tilly has also emphasized in the notion of “repertoires”—while giving meaning to contention (14–17). Thus, even though they could not bring about tangible movement successes, practices might have transformative effects on actors and their dispositions, which alter the structure of the “movement field” in subtle and latent ways. On the other hand, they also do not need to be collectively organized. Practices can be personalized and individualistic (Bennett, “The Personalization”), especially at a time when the pervasive use of digital media in protests has fomented the rise of “connective actions,” replacing the traditional role of movement organizations.

Analyzing through the lens of contentious practices thus allows us to discover their embedded meanings that are not always apparent to observers (E. W. Cheng, “Street Politics” 394–99). During the heritage preservation movements, activists not only occupied the heritage sites but also deployed their bodies as a strategy of resistance, such as in hunger strikes and human walls, to block eviction efforts. When analyzed merely as an overarching repertoire, the occupation protests during the Umbrella Movement are likely to be regarded as a spontaneous escalation strategy responding to state repression. However, by focusing on the diverse practices within the occupation protests (e.g. the difference between the Admiralty and Mong Kok camp), analysts will see how such contentious practices were not only

means of claims-making against the state authorities but also challenges against established means of contention—the idea that protests should be civic and contained. Moreover, such an approach will also reveal the voluntarist or performative actions that lie beyond calculated or instrumental strategies, as well as the heterogeneous ways (e.g. art, religion or social media) through which participants sought to express dissent on an individual rather than collective basis, thus helping analysts to discern subtle changes in their political agency.

To be sure, contentious practices are not exclusive to non-state actors. State or quasi-state actors can also develop their own practices of contention to counter those of their challengers (Yuen and Cheng 611–13). This phenomenon is especially relevant to Hong Kong because recent years have witnessed a rising trend of counter-mobilization against the pro-democracy movement. On the one hand, a number of pro-regime groups, widely suspected to be supported by the state in direct or indirect ways, have been established since around 2012. These groups often counter-mobilize against pro-democracy groups when the latter organize protest actions, attempting not only to disrupt them but also to offer counter-narratives. On the other hand, the government has adapted its repression strategies to new practices of contention. It has increasingly resorted to the manipulation of litigations to limit the freedom of assembly and prosecute pro-democracy activists, which has raised concerns over the city's esteemed rule of law. It has also used its coercion and administrative procedures to block pro-democracy candidates from running for elections and to disqualify popularly elected politicians for their political beliefs. Identifying and scrutinizing these state and quasi-state practices of contention will help analysts to capture the changing nature of state power.

## **Conclusion**

Waves of popular contention in Hong Kong's post-Handover years have drastically reshaped the landscape of contentious politics despite being unable to bring about substantial institutional changes. To enable a more thorough understanding of these transformations, this article attempts to move beyond the structural-functional, neo-institutionalist and dynamics of contention approaches that have underpinned the extant literature, which more or less tends to analyze popular contention as by-products of the social, economic and political structure. Borrowing from Bourdieu's notion of field, we propose to employ the "movement field approach" to conceive contentious politics as a field through which we aim to pay greater attention to agency (and its ambiguous interplay with structure) and to map social changes which might occur in non-institutional or less visible ways. Three dimensions of the "movement field"—discourse, space, and practices—have been identified as heuristic analytical devices to understand why,

where and how contention occurs. Although far from being exhaustive of the ways in which the “movement field” is configured, these three dimensions are the most salient ones that will enable researchers to identify elements in contentious politics that previously escape their attention.

While we have focused our discussion on Hong Kong, our approach should have relevance for other societies in which the subaltern or marginalized groups have used various tools available to them to contest the official discourses and provide counter-narratives and alternatives. In contrast to the 1980s when uprisings were precursors of democracy, the post-2010s world order following Occupy movements worldwide and the Arab Spring seems to have fallen victim to authoritarian revival. This phenomenon gives rise to the observation that the new global activism is more moment than movement (Gitlin, *Occupy Nation*). This view, however, understates how social changes often occur by diffusing gradually from non-movements and everyday lived experiences (Breugh 129–30; Bayat 15–18). A critical task for researchers, therefore, is to trace the life cycle of contentious politics and to look closely into the transformative process. In the past few years, mass protests have swept across Malaysia, Thailand, Cambodia, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan. Only those in the latter two contexts achieved their desire goals, whereas many of the rest not only failed to win concessions from the power-holders but also faced continued repression. But despite their “failures,” it is important to ask questions pertaining to how these contentions have effected social transformations in their respective contexts. The “movement field” approach will be able to provide the necessary theoretical tools.

The “movement field” approach also brings forth several methodological implications. It urges researchers to go beyond the top-down, descriptive and chronological approach of documenting popular contention and encourages them to also observe contention from below and through their visual and digital practices. Thus, researchers should focus not only on movement leaders or political elites but also on ordinary protesters, marginalized groups or counter-protesters, particularly regarding how they are connected as a network, how they act conscientiously, and how they make sense of such practices; not only about the issues being contested but also about the underlying discourse in which they are embedded and which they will shape; and not only during episodes of mass mobilizations but also in quotidian times when contentious practices are not as visible. Bottom-up research methods that demand greater involvement of researchers especially in times of contentious actions, such as in-depth interviews, participant observation, ethnography and onsite surveys during mass protests, will be powerful investigative tools.

At a time when popular contention constantly transcends our imagination, new conceptual and methodological tools are needed to

rethink the study of contentious politics. By proposing the “movement field” approach, our goal is to offer new ways for mapping social changes that go beyond functionalist, institutionalist or sometimes moralistic explanations. We hope that this attempt will inspire a collective effort in charting an alternative account of political activism and social changes in Hong Kong and beyond.

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