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# Dynamics of Tactical Radicalisation and Public Receptiveness in Hong Kong's Anti-Extradition Bill Movement

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**Abstract**

The Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill (Anti-ELAB) movement in Hong Kong was marked by a significant degree of tactical radicalisation in its first six months. Yet the movement also succeeded in maintaining a high degree of solidarity and public support. This article explains how tactical radicalisation and public receptiveness toward radical actions was achieved. It does this by drawing upon protest onsite survey data, public opinion poll data, analysis of digital media contents and field observations. Theoretically, it combines a relational approach with an emphasis on the role of discursive negotiation. The article first reconstructs the trend of movement radicalisation in Hong Kong since the late 2000s. It then examines the interactional dynamics that drove the process of radicalisation along multiple pathways during the first six months of the Anti-ELAB movement. The articulation of justifications and discursive negotiation of collective restraints is then examined. Overall, the analysis reconstructs the process of stepwise and constrained radicalisation in the Anti-ELAB movement. General theoretical implications of the analysis are discussed.

**Key Words**

Tactical radicalisation; relational approach; public opinion; ethics of solidarity; collective restraints; Hong Kong

Triggered by the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government's (SARG) proposal to revise the Fugitive Offenders Ordinance that would have allowed the extradition of suspects to mainland China, the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill (Anti-ELAB) movement was the largest and most long-lasting protest movement in Hong Kong's history. Although the first protest on the matter was held in March 2019, the movement is generally regarded as starting on June 9, 2019, when one million citizens marched in opposition to the bill. Despite the withdrawal of the bill by early September, the protests went on as protesters' demands expanded to include democratic reform and the addressing of police abuse of power. Until mid-January 2020, the movement involved four protest marches with more than one million participants, numerous other sizable protest marches, rallies organised by specific groups and sectors, class strikes in secondary schools and universities, other non-co-operation actions, and innovative actions such as airport sit-ins, Baltic Way-inspired "human chains," and the extension of political

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consumerism through the construction of a pro-movement "yellow economic circle," with yellow having been the movement's symbolic colour.

Amidst this mix of actions, there was increasing disruption and violence in the protests. The first police-protester clash occurred on June 12, 2019 as protesters surrounded the Legislative Council (LegCo) Building and forced the suspension of the LegCo meeting. Protesters used umbrellas for self-protection against police actions. Some threw bricks at the police. In early August, protesters started using petrol bombs and setting bonfires. Police use of force also escalated. The use of tear gas, bean bag rounds and rubber bullets was intensified. Specialised crowd management vehicles were deployed in late August. On October 1, China's National Day, live rounds were fired, injuring an 18-year-old protester in one instance.

The most intriguing aspect of the protests is not the escalation of actions *per se*, but the moderate movement participants' and even the general public's seeming receptiveness of protest violence. Hong Kong has long had a conservative protest culture strongly emphasising public order (Ho 2019; Ku 2007; Lee and Chan 2011). But in the Anti-ELAB movement, the moderates exhibited high levels of solidarity with militant protesters. According to a series of onsite protest surveys conducted by the authors, an absolute majority of the protesters in peaceful rallies – more than 80% in July 2019 and more than 90% in August and September 2019 – agreed that "when the government fails to listen, it is understandable for protesters to engage in radical actions."[1] Among the general public, university-conducted polls in September and October 2019 found that 55% and 59% of the respondents, respectively, agreed with virtually the same statement. Although understandable does not mean justifiable, the figures illustrated a high degree of sympathy toward radical actions. The sympathy helped the movement maintain high levels of public support. A survey in November and December 2019 found that 62.3% of the public supported the movement, only 18% were against it, and 70% believed that the movement should continue.[2]

What explains the process of tactical radicalisation with public receptiveness between June 2019 and January 2020? Tackling this question is critical to understanding the vitality of the movement. After the apparent inefficacy of peaceful protests, the movement could hardly exert pressure on the SARG without using more confrontational tactics. Yet action escalation normally risks alienating the public and political moderates. The power of the Anti-ELAB movement, therefore, partly stems from the movement's ability to *escalate* actions and *maintain solidarity and public support simultaneously*. Public support allowed action escalation to continue, though not entirely without restraint.

This study thus has dual foci of radicalisation and public receptiveness. For radicalisation, it does not only focus on the most militant protesters on the "frontline." Rather, it adopts a relational approach and sees radicalisation as the result of the dynamics in multiple arenas of interaction (Alimi 2011, 2016; de Fazio 2013; della Porta 2008). Besides, given our concern with public receptiveness, this article adds to existing research frameworks an emphasis on discursive negotiation. Part of our overall contention is that the political moderates and the general public had been receptive to radicalisation in the Anti-ELAB movement because radicalisation had been a gradual and stepwise process with the articulation of justifications and exercise of collective restraint. Through

substantiating the contention, this article adds to our general theoretical understanding of movement radicalisation.

The article first explicates the theoretical underpinnings of the analysis and the contexts of the Anti-ELAB movement. It then explains tactical radicalisation by the relational dynamics in four arenas of interactions, followed by an analysis of discursive negotiations of radical tactics and collective restraints. Implications of the analysis are discussed.

## The Relational Approach and Beyond

Following sociologist Colin Beck (2015, 18), radicalism is understood as "content that is outside the common routines of politics present within a society, oriented towards substantial change in social, cultural, economic, and/or political structures, and undertaken by any actor using extra-institutional means." Radicalisation, then, is simply the process or trend toward the adoption of more radical ideologies or action tactics.

In Beck's definition, what is considered radical is dependent on the "common routines" or existing norms in the society. The "content" of radicalism therefore varies across time and place (Accornero 2013). Besides, while the definition covers both ideologies and tactics, the two are distinct.[3] Activists and organisations holding more radical ideologies typically, but not necessarily, adopt more radical tactics (Yaziji and Doh 2013). This article focuses on tactical radicalisation in the Anti-ELAB movement.

The phenomenon of radicalisation can be examined at different levels of analysis. Some studies examined the individual-level factors that lead people to hold more positive attitudes toward political violence or other radical tactics. For example, an Israeli study found that the experience of deprivation led people to support violence, while degree of religiosity related negatively to support for violence (Zaidise, Canetti-Nisim, and Pedahzur 2007). A study of Occupy DC in the USA found that perceived violation of procedural justice by the police was related to acceptance of use of violence against police (Maguire et al. 2018). An Italian study found that people who favoured violent protests were less politically sophisticated, less socially connected, and had lesser concern for a professional career (Vergani, Barton, and Iqbal 2017).

While these studies focused on social psychological character or socio-economic conditions that were relatively stable, others focused on how radical attitudes or behaviour were developed through people's experiences in contentious politics. McCauley and Moskalenko (2008), for instance, argued that individuals can be radicalised through political grievances or victimisation, through the feeling of solidarity and love for fellow group members, or through moving along a slippery slope of incrementally more violent actions. Similarly, Bosi and della Porta (2012) identified three individual-level pathways of radicalisation. People can radicalise along: (i) an instrumental path when they perceive moderate actions as ineffective; (ii) an ideological path when radical actions are seen as needed in the quest for more fundamental social and political change; or (iii) a solidaristic path when they take radical actions to defend their group members.

Bosi and della Porta's (2012) tripartite categorisation of individual pathways is part of a broader relational approach to movement radicalisation. In this perspective, "radicalisation stems from complex and contingent sets of interactions among individuals, groups, and institutional actors … It takes place during encounters between social

movements and authorities, in a series of reciprocal adjustments" (della Porta 2018, 463). The relational approach recognises that social movements often involve the co-presence of multiple actors and different forms of actions. Participants can shift from certain modes of actions to others in the dynamic unfolding of the movements. The approach thus de-exceptionalises radical actions (della Porta 2018). That is, without denying that certain types of people might be relatively more prone to engage in radical acts, the approach sees most people as capable of being radicalised through specific interactional dynamics. This characteristic of the relational approach makes it particularly pertinent to the present study since we must explain radicalisation in a society generally understood as having a conservative protest culture.

More specifically, Alimi, Bosi and Demetriou (2012) put forward a relational framework that highlights four mechanisms occurring in four arenas of interaction as the driver of tactical radicalisation. First, opportunity and threat spiral can arise in the interaction between the movement and the political environment: participants develop their understandings of the opportunities and threats the movement faces, and certain perceptions of opportunities and threats may lead people to adopt more radical tactics. Second, violence outbidding can arise when protesters face security forces: escalation of actions by protesters and by security forces tends to reinforce each other, and protesters are particularly likely to radicalise when police actions are perceived to be indiscriminate. People may be desensitised over time, rendering them "ready" for further escalation. Third, the interaction between movements and counter-movements can lead to the phenomenon of object shift: the presence of a counter-movement opens up a new frontier of contention and can impinge on the dynamics of radicalisation. Finally, interactions among groups and participants within the movement also matter. One common phenomenon is competition for power: certain groups opt for more radical tactics to differentiate themselves from the moderates and compete for support and resources.

While Alimi, Bosi and Demetriou's framework is useful for examining radicalisation in the Anti-ELAB movement, there is a need to further highlight one element not fully recognised in their framework: that is, the role of meaning making and discursive negotiation. Generally speaking, meaning making is an important part of the social movement process as people need to make sense of the issue at hand and articulate their goals and preferred strategies (Snow and Benford 1988). For action tactics in particular, scholars have pointed out that protest actions are "learned cultural creations" (Tilly 1995, 42). When new tactics arise, activists need to engage in discursive work to help supporters and the public to make sense of them (Hayes 2006). Efforts of justification may be needed if the tactics are controversial. Depending on how supporters and the public react, discursive contestation and negotiation may ensue.

Put into the Anti-ELAB case, while the relational approach points to the significance of people's experiences gained through the interactional dynamics of a movement, how people collectively interpret their experiences can influence the adoption of radical attitudes. Lee (2018), for instance, has shown that the experience of participating in the Umbrella Movement in 2014 had a particularly strong impact on adoption of radical attitudes among avid consumers of online alternative media, which provided the symbolic resources for people to make sense of their protest experiences. Hence it is important to examine how participants in the Anti-ELAB movement continually

interpreted the ongoing protests and their own experiences. Besides, when radicalisation is seen as a process, its speed and rhythm can shape public reactions. As McCauley and Moskalenko (2008, 419) noted for involvement in terrorism: "typically an individual's progress . . . is slow and gradual, with many smaller tests before being trusted in more important missions." We can expect radicalisation of a movement, its participants and the bystanding public to be similarly gradual and stepwise.

Moreover, in this gradual process of radicalisation, participants concerned with maintaining the movement's legitimacy are likely to engage in discursive work to justify the increasingly confrontational and violent tactics. Depending on the way specific radical tactics are justified, people may then further construct the norms for regulating the use of the tactics (Weisburd and Lernau 2006). Constant negotiation and contestation among participants with different views and tactical preferences are likely to ensue. Discursive negotiation can radicalise and de-radicalise simultaneously: it can radicalise the moderate participants and members of the public by offering them the rationales and justifications to support more radical tactics; and it can de-radicalise the most radical participants by putting forward the norms that should govern and constrain actions. In any case, for the movement as a whole, if the adoption of increasingly confrontational and violent tactics does not arouse huge opposition from the moderates and the public, it should be partly due to the articulation of justifications and exercise of certain forms of collective restraint.

In sum, this article adopts a relational approach to analyse the process of tactical radicalisation in the Anti-ELAB movement, but with an additional emphasis on communication and meaning making. The main analysis shall examine the relational dynamics in four arenas of interaction and the discursive negotiation that produces collective restraints. But before the main analysis, we will present the historical and immediate contexts that set the stage for tactical radicalisation in the Anti-ELAB movement.

## Protest Culture and the Beginning of the Anti-ELAB Movement

Protests and social movements have been important in Hong Kong's local politics since the 1970s (Lui and Chiu 2000). But other than the protests supporting the Beijing student movement in 1989, there were no large-scale collective actions in the city until the July 1, 2003 protest, when half a million citizens marched on the street to protest a national security legislation. In addition to forcing the SARG to postpone the legislation, the protest was hailed for demonstrating Hong Kong citizens' ability to protest "peacefully and rationally" (Lee and Chan 2011, 64–82). The portrayal highlighted the civic quality of Hong Kong citizens, but it also reflected and reinforced the conservative political culture, which placed a strong emphasis on public order (Ku 2007).

Nevertheless, the July 1, 2003 protest kick-started a protest cycle and led to the growth of movements, groups, alternative media and new protest repertoires (Cheng 2016; Leung 2015). The July 1 protest became an annual activity in which citizens called for democratisation and expressed a range of different demands. Paradoxically, such developments led to the normalisation and routinisation of protests: as more protests occurred, protest activities became less shocking and hence less capable of eliciting

responses from the authorities. Some activists began to question the utility of "ritualistic protests" (Lee and Chan 2018, 24–49).

As a result, a trend of movement radicalisation began from the late 2000s (Cheng 2014). A "radical faction" of the democrats emerged and a more confrontational style of protest appeared. For instance, during the movement in 2010 against the construction of an express rail in Hong Kong linking to mainland China's express rail system, thousands of protesters besieged the LegCo building and there were scuffles between the police and protesters. In the early 2010s, several of the annual July 1 protests ended with some young protesters attempting to stop traffic.

Against this background, the 2013 proposal for Occupy Central (OC) could be considered a response to the radicalisation by the moderate flank of the pro-democracy movement. OC was originally conceived as a civil disobedience campaign aiming to disrupt the functioning of the financial district, Central. However, the conservative protest culture compelled the proponents of OC to downplay the proposal's coercive elements and insist on non-violence. OC was therefore a case of radicalisation with self-restraint (Lee and Chan 2018, 50–74). Although the police's use of tear gas triggered the transformation of OC into the decentralised Umbrella Movement, its leaders continued to emphasise the principle of non-violence (Cheng and Chan 2017; Tang 2015). Internal dissension arose in the latter stage of the campaign when peaceful occupation clearly could not force concessions from the government. Conflicts between militants and moderates were exacerbated by pre-existing distrust and the spatial separation between the moderate-dominated groups centred on the occupied zone around the Admiralty district and the militant-dominated Mongkok occupied site (Ho 2019; Yuen 2018).

From the late 2000s to the Umbrella Movement, radicalisation was driven largely by an instrumental logic: more disruptive protests were needed when peaceful protests failed to produce results. Not surprisingly, the failure of the Umbrella Movement was followed by further radicalisation (Lee 2018). Ideologically, the appeal of "localism" – a loosely defined discourse placing an overwhelming emphasis on Hong Kong people's local identity and interests – has increased, and calls for Hong Kong independence emerged (Lo 2018; Veg 2017). Tactically, localist groups emphasised more "valiant" protest actions. In 2016, during Chinese New Year, a confrontation saw protesters throwing bricks at the police and torching tyres. In one instance, a police officer fired a warning shot in the air.

The SARG adopted a hard-line response. Several participants involved in the Mongkok events were sentenced to as many as seven years in prison. A pro-independence party was outlawed, with individuals who publicly supported independence being banned from elections. In April 2019, a court convicted nine leaders of the Umbrella Movement of incitement, with four sent to prison for terms of up to 16 months. This approach apparently succeeded in undermining social mobilisation, with the pro-democracy movement experiencing a low tide between late 2016 and early 2019. Several protests against the disqualification of election candidates and legislators saw only limited participation and radical actions largely disappeared from 2017.

Among the public at large, there was little sign of increasing levels of acceptance of radical protest actions between 2014 and 2019. Table 1 summarises the findings from three surveys conducted in July 2014, March 2016 and March 2019 respectively.[4] The surveys contained a set of items asking people whether they found certain types of protest

**Table 1.** Hong Kong citizens finding specific forms of protests acceptable (%)

| | July 2014 | March 2016 | March 2019 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Sit-ins | 66.0 | 63.7 | 63.1 |
| Protest marches | 55.8 | 51.6 | 51.9 |
| Labour strikes | 36.8 | 41.1 | 44.1 |
| Slow driving | 30.4 | 31.5 | 28.0 |
| Charging police lines | 7.3 | 7.8 | 6.8 |
| Occupying public streets | n.a. | 19.2 | 14.2 |
| N | 1,037 | 1,012 | 1,010 |

Notes: Entries are percentages saying the action is "quite acceptable" or "very acceptable." n.a.: not applicable because the item did not exist in the survey.
Source: Surveys conducted by the Centre for Communication and Public Opinion Survey, Chinese University of Hong Kong.

actions acceptable or not. Over the five years only labour strikes gained higher levels of public acceptance. Perceived acceptability of other forms of actions either remained stable or declined somewhat.

In sum, Hong Kong experienced a period of political radicalisation in the late 2000s and early 2010s. Protest tactics had evolved to the occupation of public streets and throwing bricks at the police. These actions might not have been widely accepted by the public, but they did constitute part of the initial repertoire in the Anti-ELAB protests in June 2019, a point we will quickly return to below. More generally, the very gradual process of movement radicalisation in the 2010s should have familiarised Hong Kong citizens with some of the arguments for and against tactical radicalisation.

However, the regime has adopted a hard-line approach to suppress what it saw as radical protests. As a result of the suppression, the immediate years before the Anti-ELAB movement can also be seen as constituting a period of movement abeyance. That is, although there was the development of more radical protest tactics by militant activists and a trend toward more sympathetic public attitudes toward radicalism, there was also a general decline in actual protest participation. When the SARG proposed the revision of the Fugitive Offenders Ordinance and the Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters Ordinance in February 2019, the scale and intensity of the protests to come could hardly have been predicted.

The extradition bill aroused immediate criticism. The Civil Human Rights Front (CHRF) organised two protests on March 31 and April 28, with participation by 12,000 and 130,000 people, respectively. In May, there was a wave of online petitions. By late May and early June, opinion polls showed that citizens opposing the extradition bill clearly outnumbered citizens supporting the bill.[5] Moreover, the controversy coincided with the 30th anniversary of the Tiananmen crackdown on June 4, contributing to the huge outpouring of opposition seen in the one million strong CHRF protest on June 9.

The SARG did not back down. Chief Executive Carrie Lam announced on the evening of June 9 that the second reading of the bill would go ahead as scheduled. On June 12, tens of thousands of protesters surrounded the LegCo building and successfully forced the meeting to be called off. Protesters and police clashed and on June 15 Lam announced that the bill would be suspended. For many, this concession was inadequate since it fell short of a formal withdrawal. More importantly, the sequence of the events meant that

the government conceded only after protests became confrontational on June 12. The contingent happenings in the first week of the movement thus provided the first, instrumental rationale for radicalisation – even a one million strong peaceful protest could not force the government; it was the escalation of actions that led to the concession.

## Protest Dynamics and Tactical Radicalisation

The success of confrontational action in forcing this initial concession is, however, inadequate for explaining radicalisation and public receptiveness in the months that followed. Radicalisation needs to be understood in relation to the movement's dynamic evolution. The following analysis draws upon data from a range of sources. We conducted 26 protest onsite surveys between June 9 and December 8, 2019. The sampling method follows past research in Hong Kong and other countries (Cheng and Chan 2017; Lee and Chan 2018; Walgrave and Velhurst 2011): assistants were positioned systematically along the protest route and followed a designated procedure to select respondents. In several protests involving safety risks (for example, the possibility of violent actions by counter-protesters or police actions in protests not getting approval from the police department), we simplified the procedure by handing out pamphlets to protesters and let them complete the survey online. This approach sacrificed representativeness but was necessitated by the situation. Three of the 26 surveys had a sample size between 175 and 300, six surveys had a sample size between 301 and 500 and all other surveys had sample sizes above 501.

The surveys included questions such as motivations to participate, previous participation in Anti-ELAB movement activities, past participation in other protests and movements, source of movement-related information, and so on. Since the protests occurred at different time points over a six-month period, our questions were adjusted to address protesters' reactions to emergent issues and discourses. In several surveys, questions about radical actions and the militant protesters were also included.

It should be emphasised that the surveys were conducted during the peaceful protest marches or rallies. Hence the respondents should be mostly moderate movement participants. Although the peaceful protests were often followed by more militant actions, this does not mean that the moderate participants would necessarily find militant actions acceptable. Thus, the surveys should capture the views of a large number of moderate movement supporters.

The following analysis also draws upon three telephone surveys conducted by the Centre for Communication and Public Opinion Survey at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. The three surveys were conducted in September, October and November/December. The target respondents were Cantonese speaking Hong Kong residents, 15 years old or above. To derive the samples, a telephone database was generated by collecting the prefixes of landline and mobile numbers to produce a full set of possible phone numbers. Specific numbers were drawn randomly by computers. For landline numbers, the most recent birthday method was used to select the target respondent from a household. The sample sizes are 623, 751 and 2,008. The response rates are around 40% in each case. The data were weighted according to the age by gender by education distribution of the corresponding population when conducting the analysis.

The survey data were combined with field observations during various protest events, a review of media material, analysis of digital media content and several in-depth interviews with protest organisers. Following the relational framework, the aim was to reconstruct the dynamics in four arenas of interaction.

## Articulating and Responding to Threats and Opportunities

From the beginning, concern with and participation in the Anti-ELAB protests were driven partly by perceptions of the severe threats brought about by the extradition bill. Protest organisers had an active role in articulating the threat. In April, political parties and activists began to use *faan sung jung*, which literally means "against sending off to China," highlighting the most threatening aspect of the extradition bill. As one protest organiser acknowledged, the phrase simplified the issue, but it was essential in arousing public concern (Interview, member of a pro-democracy political party, October 2019). The threat of extradition to China was perceived as real by the protesters: in the June 9 onsite survey, 88.8% of the respondents were very or rather worried that pro-democracy figures and activists would be extradited if the law was passed, with the same proportion worried that Hong Kong citizens would be extradited for criticising mainland political matters, and 54.4% worried that themselves or their friends or family members would be extradited.

The threat was not restricted to the act of extradition of Hong Kong citizens. Numerous commentators put the extradition bill into the context of international politics and the China-USA trade dispute. They argued that the law might be used by China to extradite foreigners in Hong Kong to the mainland. In the June 9 survey, 73.6% of the respondents worried that "Hong Kong will be sanctioned economically by the international society" should the bill become law, while 71.9% worried that "important countries will cancel the no-visa arrangement for the SAR passport" and 75% worried that "foreign capital will leave Hong Kong."

The perceived severity of the matter generated an "endgame imagination." That is, the bill would signify the end of Hong Kong's status as a Chinese city with relatively higher degrees of liberty and autonomy. For instance, during the June 4 candlelight vigil commemorating the Tiananmen crackdown, public figures stated that they were unsure if the commemoration could still be held in 2020. In the onsite survey on June 16, 91.8% of the respondents "quite agreed" or "strongly agreed" that "the extradition bill could turn Hong Kong's 'one country two systems' into 'one country one system'," and 96.4% agreed that "the extradition bill will destroy Hong Kong's rule of law in one single day." The endgame imagination arguably established the need for action escalation, as it could be the last time that Hong Kong people can come out to "fight." In fact, in the June 16 survey, respondents who agreed with the severity of the bill's impact tended to agree with the statement that "when the government is not listening, it is inevitable that some protesters would resort to physical force."[6]

Perceptions of opportunities and threats continued to evolve. As protests radicalised, there were rumours in mid-August suggesting that the Chinese government would dispatch the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to quell the protests. The movement responded to the threat with a discourse of *laam chaau*, which literally means "burning together." The discourse posited that, if China employs extreme measures, it will be

sanctioned by the international community. Given China's already worsening economy, the consequences of international sanction could be severe to China. In contrast, if the movement cannot achieve success, Hong Kong will suffer hugely anyway. Therefore, the movement should continue to escalate to force the Chinese government to either make concessions or to accept mutual destruction.

The discourse of *laam chaau* thus constituted the movement's display of confidence and determination in face of the PLA threat. It was a conspicuous example of how the dynamic articulation of threats and opportunities served to rationalise tactical radicalisation. In the protest survey on August 31, 82.1% of the respondents agreed that "if extreme scenarios occur in Hong Kong, Beijing's loss will be greater than Hong Kong's," and 74.7% agreed that "under international spotlight, it actually benefits the movement if Hong Kong's situation worsens." Agreement with the two statements correlated positively with an index on acceptance of a range of radical tactics such as blocking roads, besieging police stations, and physically attacking police officers (Pearson $r = 0.30$ and 0.36, n = 497 and 498 respectively, $p < 0.001$ in both cases).

## Violence Outbidding and Protester-Police Interaction

Social movement studies have repeatedly shown that police violence can radicalise protesters (della Porta 1995; della Porta and Reiter 1998). In a relational perspective, use of force by protesters and by the police can compel each side to escalate their actions, resulting in a mutually reinforcing cycle of violence outbidding. As noted above, parallel to protesters' escalation of their use of force was the police's escalation of the use of force: in June 2019, protesters built roadblocks and threw bricks; the police fired tear gas and bean bag rounds; and the latter intensified over time. On August 5, for instance, the police fired more than 1,000 tear gas canisters. On that day, the police also arrested 165 protesters, at the time, a record number.[7]

In response to intensified police violence and arrests, the militant protesters started to use Molotov cocktails and set bonfires in mid- to late August. Notably, the original purpose of this was to stop the police from advancing and arresting people. The police responded by deploying crowd management vehicles for the first time on August 25. In September, protesters' tactics evolved to include vigilantism and vandalising of targeted shops. There were also instances where protesters used Molotov cocktails to directly attack the police. On October 1, China's National Day, the police fired 1,667 canisters of tear gas and one officer fired live rounds at a protester. To control the protests, the government used an emergency law to ban the wearing of face masks on October 4. But it only led to the further intensification of violent protests. By November 12, according to official figures, the police had fired a total of 10,000 tear gas canisters and 4,800 rubber bullets. By December 9, the media reported that the totals were 16,000 tear gas canisters, 10,000 rubber bullets and 2,000 bean bag rounds (*South China Morning Post*, February 29, 2020).

These paragraphs describe how the protesters and the police took turns to escalate, contributing to the formation of a cycle of violence. Notably, the police's escalation may also need to be partly understood in relation to the state's seeming determination to adopt a hard-line approach to handle the protests. Rhetorically, the government began to emphasise *zhi-bao zhi-luan* (stop the violence and chaos) in early August: a search in the

electronic archive Wise News shows that the phrase was not used in any Chinese newspaper article in June and July, 2019, but it started to appear in the pro-government press on August 7, and in August alone 407 articles in the communist-sponsored *Wen Wei Po* and *Ta Kung Pao* contained the phrase. Yet the relational dynamics remain crucial in that, even with the hard-line strategy, the police probably would not have escalated their use of force without the cycle of violence outbidding.

The cycle of violence could have led the public to become sympathetic to either side. Opinion polls in September and October, however, showed that while about 70% of the respondents regarded the police as using excessive force, only around 40% regarded the protesters as using excessive force.[8] The public did not strongly condemn protester violence and this arguably encouraged the militant protesters to continue their actions since the tide of public opinion was not against them.

To explain such public response to the cycle of action escalation, one needs to pay attention to one crucial aspect of Anti-ELAB movement protest tactics. Beginning in early August 2019, militant protesters engaged in fluid movement in their protest actions. Conventionally, political protests often happened in districts such as Admiralty and Central, which are commercial districts where the major political institutions are located. But as militant Anti-ELAB protesters moved around the city when confronted by riot police, protest actions moved into residential districts. When they did, it was common for local residents to go to the street to support them. In such circumstances, the protesting crowd became a mixture of militants, moderates and local residents (discernible by the way they dressed).

The police could hardly separate the militants from the moderates or even local residents on the protest sites. When they employed physical force, moderates and residents also became the victims. It thus contributed to the experience and perception of indiscriminate police violence, which in turn drove people to become more sympathetic toward radical actions. In the onsite survey on December 8, only 13.5% of the respondents had tried to stop the police from progressing at the frontline. That is, only a very small proportion of the respondents had directly engaged in some kind of "frontline actions." However, 52.2% of the respondents had experienced the police shooting tear gas near their home, 69% had been tear gassed at protest sites, 35.4% had fled a protest site, 23.5% had acquaintances who suffered police violence, and 26% had witnessed protesters being apprehended by the police. An index on experiences of police violence constructed by summing these items correlated positively and substantially with an index on acceptance of radical protest tactics (Pearson $r = 0.40$, $p < 0.001$, n = 460).

## Counter-Mobilisation and Counter-Protesters' Violence

Pro-democracy protests often had to contend with counter-mobilisation by pro-government forces. In 2014, pro-government groups organised citizens whose everyday lives were adversely affected by the continual occupation of public roads to protest against the Umbrella Movement. The counter-mobilisation effort fitted the state's employment of a public nuisance frame to de-legitimise the movement (Lee and Chan 2018, 161–165). In the Anti-ELAB movement, the pro-government forces' counter-mobilisation effort centred largely on a pro-police and anti-violence frame, which is consistent with the state's preferred framing of the matter. Between early July and

December 2019, several rallies supporting the police and/or against protest violence were held. Nevertheless, given widespread public distrust toward the police and the perception of indiscriminate police violence, the counter-mobilisation effort largely failed to achieve its intended impact.

Instead, counter-mobilisation became a factor driving radicalisation through the "Yuen Long Attack" on July 21, in which a group of suspected gangsters indiscriminately attacked protesters and citizens at the Yuen Long metro station. Although there was no definitive evidence regarding who co-ordinated the attack, a pro-government legislator was filmed congratulating the attackers soon after the attack[9]. There was also evidence that the police were aware of the possibility of an attack yet did nothing to prevent it. The media reported that several citizens had called the police when suspected gangsters dressed in white congregated on the street in the early evening hours. When the attack in the metro station began, the police took nearly 40 minutes to arrive and the attackers had largely left the station. The gangsters returned to the station to initiate a second wave of attack after the police left (*South China Morning Post*, July 23, 2019). Online reactions to these events suggest a widespread suspicion that the pro-government forces or even the Chinese government were behind the attack.

No matter how the attack was organised, the incident marked a turning point in the movement. The onsite survey conducted on October 20 asked the respondents to choose the incident, among five options, that led them to lose the most trust toward the police, and 79.5% of the respondents chose the Yuen Long Attack.[10] The onsite surveys also showed that, from July, addressing police abuse of power overtook withdrawal of the extradition bill to become the most important protest demand. In addition, the involvement of alleged gangsters positioned the protesters firmly on the side that deserved sympathy and damaged the credibility and legitimacy of counter-protests on the street.

The counter-protester-gangster linkage was reinforced in other incidents. On August 5, a group of men armed with long poles attacked protesters in the North Point district and at least four protesters were attacked by alleged gangsters with knives in the Tsuen Wan district (*Hong Kong Free Press*, August 6, 2019). There were other cases of serious violence committed by counter-protesters with or without suspected gangster linkage. In one incident, a man armed with two knives attacked three movement supporters in front of a Lennon Wall – sites around the city for people to post pro-movement messages – in the Tseung Kwan O district (*Hong Kong Free Press*, August 20, 2019).

Counter-protester violence had a direct relationship with the rise of protester vandalism. At a protest in Tsuen Wan in late August, militant protesters vandalised two mahjong parlours allegedly owned by the gangsters involved in the August 5 attack (*South China Morning Post*, August 31, 2019). This was the first instance of vandalism in the Movement. More generally, incidents of serious counter-protester violence disrupted the sense of public order. Protesters felt that they could no longer take their safety for granted, with the police perceived as unable or even unwilling to protect protesters. This engendered the perceived need for and justification of self-protection with physical force. This is an important context for the rise of vigilantism in September. In the October opinion poll, 52.6% of the respondents acknowledged that protesters "can self-defend, though limited to stopping the attacker" when conflicts arise, whereas 18.2% believed that protesters can "counter-attack physically." Only 25.8% insisted on calling the police to handle conflicts between protesters and counter-protesters.

### *Intra-Movement Interaction: From Solidarity to Guilt Feelings*

Lastly, radicalisation can also be driven by the internal dynamics of a movement. But instead of a competition for power among movement groups, the Anti-ELAB movement was characterised by a high degree of solidarity between the moderate and radical flanks. Among the most commonly evoked slogans include "no severing of ties and no splitting," "going up and down together," and "brothers climbing mountains, each offering one's own efforts." Over the months, protesters increasingly addressed each other as *sau juk*, which literally means "hands and feet," and signifies a strong sense of comradeship. In our onsite survey on August 18, when asked about how they felt toward the protesters who used various radical means to express their demands, 95% of respondents agreed with the statement, "I felt that they are voicing out on my behalf," 97.4% agreed with the statement, "I felt that we are in the same boat" and 84.4% agreed with the statement, "I felt that I am one of them." Notably, the survey was conducted on August 18, a peaceful protest march participated by 1.7 million citizens (according to CHRF). The figures thus showed that strong feelings of solidarity with the militants were indeed widespread among participants in peaceful protests in the movement.

Solidarity was also manifested in the actions undertaken by the protesters. When arrested protesters were sent to specific police stations, other protesters often gathered outside the station to render moral support. For example, in December, rallies were organised outside the Lai Chi Kok Reception Centre to show support for the arrested protesters in detention there.

Lee (2020) has outlined the conditions and factors that facilitated the production and maintenance of such solidarity in the Anti-ELAB movement. First, in contrast to the Umbrella Movement, which occurred when tension between the radical and moderate flanks of the pro-democracy movement was on the rise, there was already an ongoing trend of reconciliation between the moderate and radical flanks between late 2016 and early 2019. In addition, the Anti-ELAB movement attracted the participation of many young participants who had little knowledge and experience about past conflicts between the radicals and moderates. Besides, the protest experiences, especially the common experiences of police violence as discussed earlier, contributed to the feeling of comradeship. Lastly, an ethics of solidarity codified into a set of discursive devices was developed and regularly evoked to manage intra-movement debates and contain internal conflicts.

It should be acknowledged that tensions did exist between the moderates and the radical protesters in the Anti-ELAB movement, with online debates about movement tactics and norms becoming increasingly heated over time. But into December 2019, the general feeling of solidarity remained largely intact. In the onsite survey on December 8, 95.8% of respondents agreed that the militants were acting and speaking on their behalf, 97.4% felt that they were in the same boat and 84.4% felt that they were "one of them." Moreover, as a result of thousands of arrests, the feeling of solidarity was supplemented by a sense of guilt.[11] Many moderates felt that militant protesters had paid the price on their behalf. In the onsite survey on December 8, 96.9% of the respondents agreed that "I felt [the militant protesters] have sacrificed on behalf of the peaceful protesters," 79.5% agreed that "I felt that the peaceful protesters owed them something," 85.0% agreed "they made me feel that I have done too little for this movement," and 92.0% agreed that "I feel guilty when I watch them being arrested."

Both the sense of solidarity and the feeling of guilt could compel people to remain sympathetic, if not supportive, toward radical actions. In the December 8 onsite survey, an index on feelings of solidarity created based on the three statements listed earlier related strongly positively to acceptance of radical tactics ($r = 0.53$, $p < 0.001$, n = 901), so does an index on guilt feeling created based on the four statements in the above paragraph ($r = 0.54$, $p < 0.001$, n = 901). In other words, solidarity helps explain the moderates' receptiveness toward radicalisation in the Anti-ELAB movement.

## Communication, Tactical Negotiations and Collective Restraints

The previous section has explicated the interactional dynamics that contributed to tactical radicalisation. However, the analysis can at best only partially account for public receptiveness of protest violence. By definition, radicalism involves acts that deviate from mainstream social norms and routines. Ordinary citizens are unlikely to understand the tactics, let alone find them acceptable, without efforts spent on justifying the actions. In addition, the extent and speed of the radicalisation process need to be contained such that the process will not go too far and too quickly before the moderates and the public can "catch up." In short, collective restraints have to be produced and negotiated.

Throughout the Anti-ELAB movement, articulation of the justifications and constraints of radical actions can be readily found in the public arena. Take the example of a 15-page pamphlet produced by a group of Taiwan university students. It explained the Hong Kong protests and addressed questions such as: "What is the extradition bill?" "Why are Hong Kong people opposed to the bill?" and so on. It has a page on why protesters needed to set bonfires, another on the vandalism at metro stations, and one more justifying the vandalising of shops. On setting fires, the pamphlet began with a reference to the Yuen Long attack and then it pointed toward continual police violence. Then the last paragraph stated:

> There are protesters who set fires in front of police stations or damaged government buildings in order to protest against police violence. There are also protesters setting fires in the middle of the road when confronting the police in order to obstruct the police. It aims at gaining time for the frontline protesters to retreat. Protesters do not set fire to residential buildings and do not attack innocent citizens.

Whether the statement accurately reflected what frontline protesters did can be debated, and we will return to this issue below. But the statement, as well as the pamphlet as a whole, demonstrated that even supporters of the movement in Taiwan were aware of how certain controversial actions were justified and some of the constraints exercised by militant protesters when adopting radical tactics.

We can gain further insights into the mechanisms of tactical negotiation and collective restraints by examining the contents of LIHKG, an online forum established in 2016. In the Anti-ELAB movement, the forum was recognised as the central communication platform on which supporters could discuss all aspects of the protests and even engage in action co-ordination.[12] As already noted, tactical negotiation occurred in many different platforms. But for this article, LIHKG constitutes the site where the movement's tactical negotiation can be most effectively observed and analysed.

The authors closely followed LIHKG discussions. We developed a computer program that can scrap or take down all the posts and comments on LIHKG. We then tried to identify the basic patterns of posting and commenting, conducted keyword analyses and read the most popular posts to gain insights into the tactical negotiation process. Specifically, the process discerned through the analysis was marked by three core elements: event-drivenness and post-event evaluation, norm construction and action repair and the norm-action gap.

To explicate this process and the three elements, we can first note the time when different keywords representing or related to various tactics began to emerge in online discussions. Figure 1 summarises the percentages of comments in the public affairs channel of LIHKG containing: (i) *fo-mo-faat* (fire magic), a euphemism used by movement supporters to refer to Molotov cocktails; (ii) *jong-sau* (renovation), another euphemism referring to vandalism; and (iii) *dong-tit* (Party rail), a derogatory label for the underground railway company that mocked its apparent willingness to serve the Communist Party. The keywords appeared at distinctive time points. None of the three keywords was prominently used in June and July 2019. They appeared in online discussions around the time when the related actions started to appear on the street: protesters began using Molotov cocktails in early August; vandalisation of metro stations began in late August, and the vandalism of targeted shops emerged in late September and early October.

The appearance of the keywords was, in some cases, directly tied to specific happenings in certain protest events. "Party rail" is a case in point. It became a prominent term on August 24, when the metro closed several stations near the route two hours before a scheduled protest march. The metro company was seen as trying to "help" the government to reduce the size of the protest. The event directly led to the rise of the derogatory label in online discussions and the subsequent emergence of vandalism at metro stations.

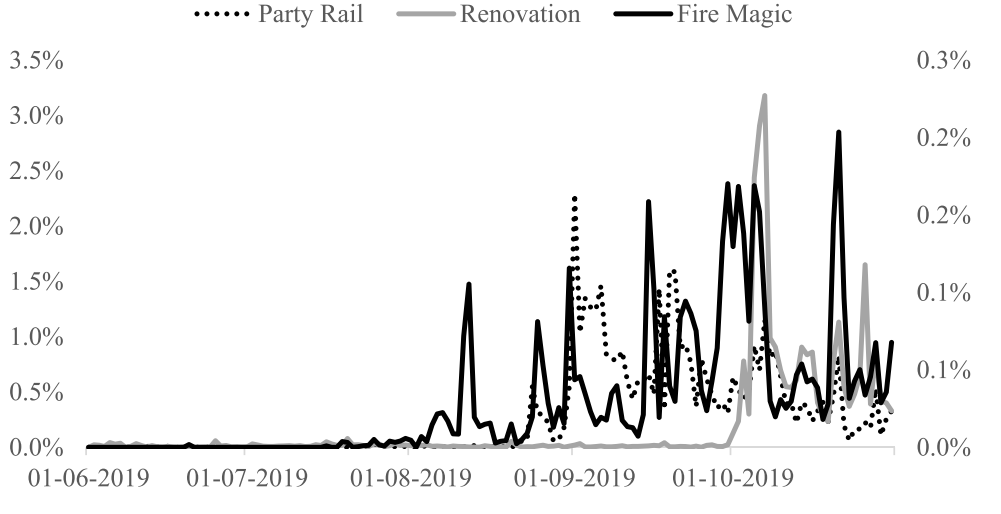


**Figure 1.** Prevalence of radical tactics-related keywords on LIHKG, June 1–October 31, 2019.

Note: The Y-axis on the left indicates percentages of posts containing the keywords "renovation" and "Party rail." The Y-axis on the right indicates percentages of posts containing "fire magic."

The keywords' prominence typically reached an initial peak about a week after initial emergence; for example, the prominence of "Party rail" peaked on September 1. This is understandable because the keywords' emergence also signified the advent of the associated tactics at the protest sites, which generated the need to make sense of the tactic.

More generally, depending on the rhythm of protest actions, relevant online discussions could also take up a distinctive rhythm. Figure 2 shows the average number of comments in the public affairs channel of LIHKG on each day of the week between June and November 2019. It should be noted that, in the period under study, the Anti-ELAB movement was virtually the only topic discussed in the public affairs channel. In June, the number of comments on the seven days of a week did not differ substantially. But into July and August, a clear weekly pattern appeared. The number of comments was particularly large on Monday, followed by Tuesday and Wednesday. The discussions reached the lowest points on Thursdays and Fridays before rising again during weekends. The reason for the pattern is that the most prominent collective actions in the movement in July and August typically occurred on Saturdays and Sundays. The actions often gave rise to unforeseen scenarios that shocked movement participants and the public. People had a strong urge to make sense of the weekend events. Hence online discussions became particularly active on Monday. The same weekly pattern existed in September. However, into October, the rhythm of protest actions changed.[13] As the metro continued to suspend services when protest clashes or even peaceful protests occurred and the police almost routinely disapproved applications for holding protests, protesters turned to organising numerous small-scale protests in different parts of the city and on different days instead of focusing on large collective actions at a single place during the weekends. Hence the weekly pattern in online discussions also changed in October before it re-emerged in November.

The previous descriptions and Figure 2 's pattern suggest that tactical negotiation was often event-driven and movement participants have been particularly invested in post-

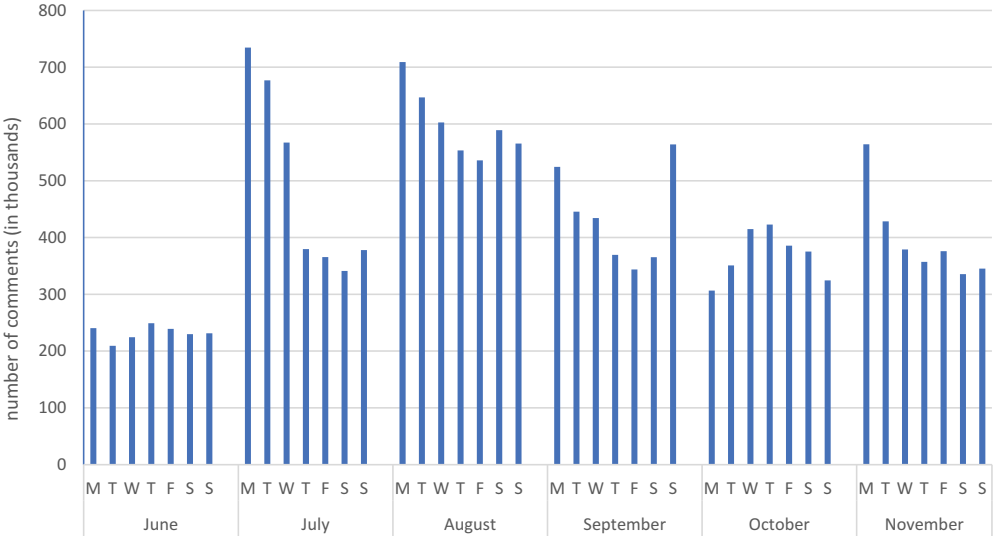


**Figure 2.** Average number of LIHKG comments by day of the week between June and November, 2019

event evaluations. Most pertinent to the dynamics of radicalisation, heated debates could appear in cases where specific actions were seen as having crossed the line of justifiability. One example was the airport action on August 13. In late July, protesters started using airport sit-ins to promote their cause to the international community. The earliest airport actions were non-disruptive, as protesters merely sat down at the arrival hall of the airport and expressed their views to the international media and visitors. However, on August 13, some protesters blocked the entrance to the restricted areas of the airport and prevented travellers from taking their flights. In addition, a group of protesters detained a mainland journalist who was accused of acting suspiciously at the protest site (*Hong Kong Free Press*, August 14, 2019).

The incident aroused fierce debates on whether preventing travellers from taking their flights could cost the movement its public sympathy and whether protesters have the right to detain suspicious individuals at protest sites. On LIHKG, some users tried to articulate the norms that should govern the use of physical force. One prominent post developed by a self-proclaimed group of "lawyers, bankers, software developers, political scientists, and historians" likened protest sites to combat zones. The post acknowledged the need for anticipatory self-defence. The post then listed nine principles, including "level of force used by the combatants cannot exceed what is needed in the situation," "combatants cannot use force against non-combatants and citizens," "allow all people affected to receive humanitarian aid," "no stealing or robbing of the properties of opponents, except weapons," and so on.

Notably, such negotiation sometimes went beyond discussion and involved actions. In the airport controversy, some movement supporters went to the airport to apologise to the international visitors on August 14. This is not the only time moderate protesters staged apologies to citizens who were deemed to have suffered from disruptions caused by protest actions. In fact, apology action occurred as early as June 25, when a small group of protesters went to the entrance of the Inland Revenue Department Building to apologise for the "occupation action" on the previous day (*Hong Kong Free Press*, June 26, 2019).

Negotiations about the norms of actions were often tension-filled. Not all militant protesters appreciated the apology actions. Some protesters criticised others for being "air-con strategists," that is, people who comment on movement strategies while staying in air-conditioned places and not participating. Some did not even agree with the basic idea that there should be moral constraints on actions. Nonetheless, normative discussions persisted. When vigilantism arose in September, online discussions called for the use of proportionate violence against only those who physically attacked protesters. When protesters started vandalising shops, online discussions developed the idea of "vandalising the black [shops run by gangsters], decorating the red [shops owned by mainland Chinese capital], boycotting the blue [shops supporting the government], and purchasing at the yellow [shops supporting the movement]." The construction of such norms was essentially a call for restraints.

Nevertheless, there can be conspicuous gaps between the norms proposed online and frontline actions. For example, there were clearly problematic instances of "disproportionate" vigilantism. On November 11, a 57-year-old man confronted protesters who had vandalised a metro station. One protester poured inflammable fluid onto him and set him

alight, resulting in severe injury. The act was criticised by many movement supporters. When vandalism was concerned, protesters continued to attack not only "black" but also "red" and some "blue" shops. The norm-action gap arguably became clearer as radicalisation continued.

The presence of the norm-action gap did not render normative discussions meaningless, however. It remained significant that the normative discussions existed. Even if the militant protesters did not adopt exactly the norms articulated online, they were at least reminded of the need to consider public reactions to and the moral justifiability of their action. There was an ongoing attempt to strive for a normative balance though the point of balance was continually shifting as the movement evolved (Weisburd and Lernau 2006).

In fact, militant protesters continued to exhibit some restraints in their actions. Up to late January 2020, vandalism remained targeted at specific types of shops. No looting occurred and fires were mostly set on rubbish on the streets or at the entrances of metro stations or targeted shops. In the opinion poll conducted in November and early December, 71.1% of the respondents agreed that "the police had used excessive force," whereas only 32.8% agreed that "the protesters had used excessive force." Public tolerance of protester violence was arguably conditioned on the presence of such restraints and communication activities have been crucial in developing and communicating the justifications and the restraints.

## Concluding Remarks

This article has sought to explain the phenomenon of tactical radicalisation and public receptiveness toward radical tactics in the Anti-ELAB movement in Hong Kong between June 2019 and January 2020. Radicalisation was already a trend from the late 2000s and the Anti-ELAB movement had strong public support for its goals. Coupled with government unresponsiveness to peaceful protests, the basic conditions and initial rationale for action escalation were present. More importantly, radicalisation was driven by the dynamics in various arenas of interaction. We discussed the role of the construction of threats and opportunities, violence outbidding and indiscriminate police violence, counter-protester violence and solidarity between the moderate and radical flanks. In addition, we emphasised how communication activities helped articulate the justification and norms for radical tactics. It helped the moderates to come to terms with the radical tactics on the one hand and pushed militants to exercise restraint on the other. Overall, the public could remain largely receptive toward tactical radicalisation because it was a gradual, stepwise and restrained process.

This article helps explain the vitality of the movement in the period being analysed. For half a year, the movement has been capable of adopting increasingly disruptive and confrontational actions to pressure the police and the government. Without the escalation, the movement might have lacked the power to force the police into making mistakes and compelling the government to concede. But what is more remarkable is the movement's capacity to maintain internal solidarity and public support in the process of action escalation, and such solidarity and public support arguably further facilitated the process of radicalisation. This situation was made possible only with the combination of a series of favourable conditions, relational mechanisms and strategic actions.

The long-term consequence of the radicalisation process examined in this article remains unclear. The analysis does not suggest that tactical radicalisation can go on *ad infinitum*. By late 2019 and early 2020, as the level of disruptiveness and violence had increased, further radicalisation had already become practically difficult. Militant tactics had become more difficult to justify. The norm-action gap had become more conspicuous, and tactical negotiation had become more tension-filled. Many members of the public and moderate movement participants could reject specific radical tactics when radicalisation outpaced adjustment of people's latitude of acceptance.

More importantly, by the second half of 2020, the Anti-ELAB movement had been effectively ended by the combination of pandemic control policies, the establishment of a new National Security Law and the prosecution of protesters arrested during the months of Anti-ELAB protests. Such responses by the state raised the costs of social protests and especially radical actions substantially.

However, we cannot totally dismiss the possible long-term cultural consequences of what transpired in the latter half of 2019. Hong Kong has for decades had a conservative political culture that put overwhelming emphasis on order and rationality. Throughout the Anti-ELAB movement, society witnessed a wholesale re-evaluation of the meanings of violence and social order. There was growing awareness of the varieties of violence, the nuances in the application of radical tactics and the possible conditions and situations that might make violent protests tolerable, understandable, or even justifiable. The Anti-ELAB movement has enriched the radical imagination in Hong Kong and generated new symbolic resources that activists can draw upon. In this light, while state repression through policing and legal prosecution might undermine radical protests through changing people's instrumental calculation of the costs and benefits involved, state repression might also be perceived by supporters of the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong as "state violence" and therefore inadvertently have further consolidated their sympathy toward radicalism.

Theoretically, this article has illustrated the utility of the relational approach to explaining tactical radicalisation. Alimi, Bosi, and Demetriou's (2012) notion of arena of interaction has proven useful in structuring the interpretations in the current analysis. But instead of merely "replicating" the relational analysis, the Anti-ELAB movement provided a case in which competition for power among movement groups was replaced by an ethics of solidarity that bound the factions together. Solidarity led the moderates to become more receptive to radical tactics at one end. It compelled the militant protesters to consider the views and preferences of the moderates and the public at the other. Whether similar phenomena can be discerned in other protest movements is an open question, but this study illustrates that competition for power is not the only possible intra-movement mechanism that impinges on the dynamics of radicalisation.

Two possible limitations of a relational analysis need to be acknowledged here. First, this study does not pay much attention to the individual-level factors behind radicalisation. We cannot deny that some individuals – holding certain ideologies, of certain age groups, or belonging to certain social classes, and so on – might be more prone to radicalism than others. Nevertheless, this article does not put much emphasis on individual-level analysis because radicalisation with public receptiveness in the Anti-ELAB movement is treated as a society-wide phenomenon. Explaining individual-level variation is not the primary task here. But future analysis can supplement this research with an

examination of the factors that explain individual-level variations in radicalism (Cheng et al. forthcoming).

Second, while the analysis emphasises the dynamic interactions among various actors and their environment, one might argue that certain overall strategies on the part of specific actors were pre-determined. The state adopted a hard-line approach to protest movements in the years before the Anti-ELAB movement and it has maintained that hard-line approach during recent protests. As noted in the analysis, the relational dynamics – especially the cycle of violence outbidding – could have been different if the state's strategy had been different. But it does not negate the importance of relational dynamics. The point to note is that relational dynamics unfold against the backdrop of pre-existing strategies and goals. Nonetheless, although the present analysis does not illustrate such a phenomenon, actors can also adjust their strategies and goals as the relational dynamics evolve.

Meanwhile, the analysis highlighted the role of communication activities and the development and negotiation of collective restraints in a process of gradual radicalisation. People's latitude of acceptance typically shifts in a step-wise manner. Interestingly, the case of the Anti-ELAB movement suggests that, for tactical negotiation and collective restraints to maintain public receptiveness, protest actions need to follow a certain pace and rhythm. In the process, the justifiability of and reasons for using specific tactics need to be articulated. The militant protesters need to exercise restraints so that their actions would not be seen as indiscriminate and inconsistent, whereas sometimes the restraints can be proposed by the moderate side. Although the militant protesters do not always follow all the norms articulated by the moderates, the negotiation process itself represents a search for normative balance.

The discursive negotiation process should be seen as both radicalising and de-radicalising. It was a process through which the moderates and the radicals searched for their common ground. The presence of the norm-action gap reminds us that there is no guarantee for the actual achievement of common grounds, but as noted in the analysis, even when a norm-action gap exists, the ongoing attempt to communicate and to narrow down the gap can have significant implications on protest actions.

However, there is no reason to believe that all communication processes in all social movements could successfully lead people on two sides to come closer to each other. In the Anti-ELAB movement, two conditions have contributed to the successful emergence of collective restraints. First, the presence of the online forum LIHKG as the central communication platform for the movement and its affordances encouraged people to pay attention and appeal to the majority opinion, instead of attracting a small group of like-minded individuals. Second, the ethics of solidarity compelled moderates and radicals to maintain a basic degree of mutual recognition and respect to each other. The outcome of discursive negotiation could have been different if these conditions were not present.

In social movement studies, the significance of meaning or sense-making in the process of tactical innovation has already been noted (Hayes 2006). But making sense of a new tactic can occur before the tactic is employed – the debates surrounding Occupy Central in 2013 and 2014 that preceded the Umbrella Movement were a case in point. This article, in contrast, shows that movement supporters and activists tended to make sense of the new tactics after the tactics appeared in specific events. The sense-making activities thus became embedded into the relational and interactional dynamics of radicalisation. In this sense, an emphasis on discursive negotiation and collective restraints does not deviate from the relational approach.

It calls attention to the possible role communication processes and mechanisms that constrain the speed and scope of radicalisation can play in facilitating public receptiveness.

## Notes

1 The research team conducted 26 onsite protest surveys between June 9 and December 8, 2019. The data associated with the study are not publicly available. Interested parties are welcome to contact the authors for further information and details.

2 All three surveys were conducted by the Centre for Communication and Public Opinion Survey at the School of Journalism and Communication, the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

3 For studies on "claim" or ideological radicalisation, see Bondes and Schucher (2014) and Mueller (1999).

4 All three surveys were conducted by the Centre for Communication and Public Opinion Survey at the Chinese University of Hong Kong using the same methodology. The sample sizes were 1,037, 1,012 and 1,010 respectively.

5 A Chinese University of Hong Kong poll conducted in late May and early June found that 47% of the public was against the bill, while only 27% supported it. An opinion poll conducted by the Public Opinion Program at the University of Hong Kong in the same period found that 66% of Hong Kong citizens were opposed to extraditing Hong Kong citizens to mainland China for trials.

6 Agreement with the two statements regarding impact are correlated with agreement with the statement regarding the inevitability of protesters using physical force at $r = 0.14$ and 0.10, n = 844 and 855, respectively, $p < 0.001$ in both cases. For this article, it is unnecessary to sort out the causal relations between the variables; the correlations suggest that the various items constituted a cluster of meanings articulated with each other in some ways. The same applies to other correlations to be reported below.

7 Information was derived from the response by the Secretary of Security to legislator Chu Hoi-dick's query, which was available on Chu's Facebook public page.

8 The surveys were conducted by the Centre for Communication and Public Opinion Survey. The sample sizes are 623 and 751 for the September and October surveys, respectively.

9 The film was shown in programs such as an episode of Radio Television Hong Kong's Hong Kong Connection, titled"Who governs the truth of July 21,"aired on July 13, 2020.

10 The other four options were the police-protester clash outside the LegCo on June 12, the protesters' breaking into the LegCo on July 1, the attack by riot police on protesters inside the Prince Edward metro station on August 31, and the firing of a real bullet that nearly killed a young protester on October 1.

11 By December 8, the Hong Kong police had made a total of 5,947 arrests in relation to the Anti-ELAB protests. Many arrested protesters could be facing charges of rioting, which carries a maximum sentence of 10 years of imprisonment.

12 In our July 1 protest onsite survey, 55.2% of the respondents stated that they "quite often" or "frequently" obtained movement-related information through LIHKG. The figure grew to 82.5% in the August 31 survey. Notably, unlike social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter where each user is embedded in his/her own network, LIHKG involves all users in the same large-scale deliberation. By looking at the most popular lists, all users can easily discern the general sentiments of the forum. LIHKG arguably facilitated the effective communication of the majority view within the movement.

13 Into September and October, the metro continued to suspend services when protest clashes or even peaceful protests occurred, and the police almost routinely disapproved the application of the "no objection letter" (which is legally required for holding protests in Hong Kong). It led protesters to turn to organise numerous small-scale protests throughout different parts of the city and on various days instead of focusing on having a large collective

action event at one single place during the weekend.

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