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The spontaneous nature of protesters in
Umbrella Movement

Chun Wai YANG

2015
Abstract

The umbrella movement was defined as a civil disobedience movement (Standnews 2015). At the peak, protesters occupied four areas. In Admiralty, there was organized by different civil social organizations, such as Scholarism and Hong Kong Federation of Students. However, in Mong Kok, the protests were spontaneous. After the dismiss of the movement, a few of them still continue protests in Mong Kok. This paper aims to address why some protesters selected to contribute their power in Mong Kok rather than the relatively organized Admiralty. I reviewed the existing theoretical framework on protest mobilization – social cognition perspective which became the direction of my methodology. This study used semi-structured interviews as primacy method of data collection because it allows researcher to explore social movement participants’ views of reality. By empirical data, this paper argues that social cognition, peer influence and uniqueness of Mong Kok determined the decision-making of protesters.
Content page

1. Introduction ----------------------------- P.4-5
2. Literature review ------------------------ P.5-8
3. Aims of study --------------------------- P.8-9
4. Methodology ----------------------------- P.9-11
5. Findings ------------------------------- P.11-13
6. Discussion ------------------------------ P.13-16
7. Conclusion ------------------------------ P.16
8. Limitation of study -------------------- P.16-17
9. Acknowledgement ------------------------ P.17
10. Reference ------------------------------ P.18-19
11. Appendix ------------------------------ P.20
Geographical decision-making of protesters: an empirical research on Mong Kok protesters in Umbrella movement

1. Introduction
Hong Kong, as a hybrid regime (liberal authoritarianism), has civil liberties but no the free and fair elections. Therefore, calling for introduction of full democracy (i.e. the universal suffrage) is always one of the major goals of the political movements.

In 2014, umbrella movement, as the second large-scale social movement in the history of Hong Kong, emerged to respond the too slow democratic development and the decision of Standing Committee of the National People's Congress on the 2017 Chief Executive election - a nominating committee would be established to nominate two to three candidates, each of whom must receive the support of over half of the committees (Standnews 2015). The number of participants reached about 1.2 million (Standnews 2015). As the movement expanded, hundreds of thousands of people occupied key areas, including Admiralty, Mong Kok and Causeway Bay, and it lasted over 70 days. It was finally failed to introduce the universal suffrage. However, the scale of the “people power” with the discipline, politeness and orderliness won the world’s admiration (Hui 2015: pp 112).

The umbrella movement was defined as a civil disobedience movement (Standnews 2015). At the peak, protesters occupied four areas. In Admiralty, there was organized by different civil social organizations, such as Scholarism and Hong Kong Federation of Students. However, in Mong Kok, the protests were spontaneous. After the dismiss of the movement, a few of them still continue protests in Mongkok. They in general call themselves as shoppers. A central question at hand is why they selected to contribute their power in Mong Kok rather than the relatively organized Admiralty?

However, most of the studies on umbrella movement always focuses on the formation, development and demise. A few studied on the micro-level of the movement - the nature of protesters. Therefore, this paper attempts to examine the spontaneous nature of protests in Mong Kok. I reviewed the existing theoretical
framework on protest mobilization – social cognition perspective which became the direction of my methodology. This study used semi-structured interviews as primacy method of data collection because it allows researcher to explore social movement participants’ views of reality in order to revise existing theory.

This report will be divided into six sections. First, I would review the existing literature on social movement and borrow a theoretical framework - social cognitive framework, for my direction of analysis. Second, two major aims of my study would be discussed. Third, the methodology of my research, including data collection and data analysis, would be discussed. The fourth section would present the finding of my research. The fifth section would interpret the finding to explore the phenomenon and generate a new theory on the geographical decision-making of protesters. Lastly, the conclusion and limitation of my study would be given.

2. Literature review

i) Existing studies on umbrella movement
Social movement is defined as “a collectivity acting with some degree of organization and continuity outside institutional channels for the purpose of promoting or resisting change in the group, society, or world order of which it is a part” (Lui & Chiu 2000 pp.3). In general, researchers view social movement as a collective action which happens in informal politics.

Traditionally, the study of social movement always focuses on the formation, development and demise. For many years, the study of Hong Kong’s democratization was elite-centered, focusing on the bargaining between Chinese government and the Hong Kong democrats (Lui & Chiu 2000). Ma Kgok (2008), in his classical study on civil social and democratization in Hong Kong, argued that the dynamics of civil society in Hong Kong have affected the democracy movement in Hong Kong. Civil society functions as a counter-image of the state and is vital to development of democracy in different aspects and stage of democratization. According to Ma (2008), the civil social organizations (CSOs) in general join together to form ad hoc fronts to fight for a common cause. For example, in 2003, the Civil Human Rights Front was formed by 30 diversified CSOs, including 4 human right groups and 3 professional groups (Ma 2008). However, there was no any ad hoc front in Umbrella
Movement. Rather, different CSOs has been engaged into the movement. Scholarism, the Hong Kong Federation of Students (HKFS), Occupy Central with Love and Peace (OCLP) would be regarded as the most prominent groups. Also, the interaction between civil societies and government is not sufficient to provide the full picture of the movement since it ignored Hong Kong’s nature of crony capitalism.

Compared with Ma (2008), Ortmann (2015) provided a comprehensive explanation on the origins of the movement in the historical perspective. He argued that the historical interactions among different actors, including Chinese government, Hong Kong government and business sector, political parties and masses, helped to shape the formation of movement. In addition, he argued that mass have gradually replaced political parties in the Hong Kong’s democratization due to the internal split within pan-democratic camp. This assertion was similar with the argument of Ma (2008). However, he ignored the fact that there was also the split within the masses in the movement. Some radical activists were dissatisfied the long period of nonviolent protests, and engaged in alternative mean to pressure the Chinese government and Hong Kong government. The split within the masses could be one of the possible explanation on the drawbacks of the movement (Hui 2015).

Compared with Ortmann (2015), Hui (2015) did not focus much more on the formation of the movement. However, her focus was on the development and dismiss of the movement. Hui (2015) analyzed in the state-centered perspective which is a strategic to understand the weak and strong points of the state’s structure. She argued the Hong Kong government has unintentionally “constructed” on the movement. Using excessive forces and coercion roused public grievance and increased the participants of the movement. People flooded into Admiralty to protect the students. Later, protests expanded to Causeway Bay and Mong Kok. Rather than forcing protestors to give up, every episode of violence against protestors drove more support for the movement (Hui 2012). Compared with Ortmann (2015), Hui (2015) considered the split and distrust within the masses. Most of protesters were unwilling to stay for long haul because they needed to make a living. The most committed came out and stayed at occupied areas. In contrast, the uncommitted and impatient protesters wanted more “forceful” escalation. In 30 November 2014, HKFS tried to surround the Central Government Offices peacefully which finally led to large scale conflicts between police and protestors (Standnews
This ill-conceived protest escalation advanced the ebbing of public support for street occupations although the government also excessively use the force.

Hui (2015) considered the split of masses toward the strategy of protest. However, there is at least a type of split which always be ignored or did not be explored deeply, the geographical split of masses. During the movement, hundreds of thousands of protesters occupied key areas, including Admiralty, Mong Kok and Causeway Bay. Why some protesters selected to contribute their power in a relatively dangerous Mong Kok rather than the relatively organized Admiralty? The geographical constraints (limited lands) could not explain this split. It is because with the development of movement, protesters were supposed to occupy the areas which is close to Admiralty, such as Central and Causeway Bay. In Mong Kok, the protesters were spontaneous. After the dismiss of the movement, a few of them still continue protest activities in in the form of “fluid occupy”. They call themselves as shoppers.

ii) Theoretical Framework – social cognitive framework

Although the geographical split of masses in Umbrella movement has been underresearched, a lot of social movement and collective behavior studies have developed different theoretical frameworks to understand why people join organizational behaviors. Traditionally, there are two schools of protest mobilization. The first is the resource mobilization perspective which argue social movements are organized activities that make a normal cycle of sociopolitical life (Jenkins 1983). However, the unit of analysis of this perspective is the organization of the movement rather than the individual participant (Jenkins 1983). Therefore, this perspective is not suitable my study on micro-level of social movement. Also, it could not explain why the geographical split of masses within Umbrella movement emerged – occupied area of Mong Kok was a spontaneous nature, not organized by any organizations.

For analysis of individual participant in Umbrella movement, social cognitive framework is much more suitable. This framework views people as active information seekers to antiestablishment activities. Davies (1962) stressed the states of mind and individual emotion as the causes of the social movement. A particular state of mind, such as grievance and discontent, possibly created by extraordinary
and unusual social conditions, would lead to “a willingness to act collectively in ways that are defined as unusual” (Davies 1962 pp.7). In this sense, a social cognitive framework in organizational behavior states that individual cognition and external environmental situation “determine what a person becomes and can do which in turn affects subsequently behavior” (Davies 1962 pp.7).

Cognition means the mental action and understanding by past experiences, senses and thinking (Davies 1962). It is based on the concept of expectancy that a particular event will lead to a particular outcome. It implies past experiences by previous behaviors would influence on present decision-making. If a decision led to positive results, people are more likely to decide in a similar way given a similar situation. In other words, if a decision led to negative results, people would select another choice.

Social cognitive framework summarizes and suggests key concepts – cognition and environment. Both of them were good for my direction of analysis and became preset categories for the data analysis.

Theoretical map: social cognitive framework

3. Aims of study

There are two major aims of my research. First, this research aims to examine the underresearched aspect of Umbrella movement - spontaneous nature of protests in Mong Kok. After the umbrella movement, quite a few of studies have emerged. However, they always focus on the formation, development and demise of the movement. Few examine the micro-level of the movement. During the movement,
the occupied area of Mong Kok was not organized by any movement organizations. It emerged by accident. In other words, the protests were spontaneous, even after the movement still continue protest activities in the form of “fluid occupy”. The study would like to revise existing theory to explain this phenomenon and fill into the knowledge gap on collective behaviors theory.

Second, the research aims at contribution on the studies of Hong Kong. Traditionally, scholars, no matter of their nationality, have paid less attention to Hong Kong studies. Different university professors, including Lui Tai-lok and Lee Lap Fung, have criticized about this phenomenon. Therefore, by investigating the geographical split of masses in Umbrella movement, this study would like to fill into the knowledge gap on Hong Kong studies.

4. Methodology

This study is designed to explore an underresearched aspect of human behaviors within social world - why some protesters selected to contribute their power in Mong Kok in the Umbrella movement. This section would be divided into two fundamental parts – data collection and data analysis.

i) Data collection

This study primarily relied on the semi-structured interviews to collect data from the 12 protesters in Mong Kok. I choose semi-structured interview as a primary method of data-collection because a loosely structured set of questions (See appendix 11.1) could allow me to introduce new questions based on the interviewee’s experiences and encourage interviewees to elaborate their experiences to allow the emergence of unanticipated issues (Klandermans & Staggenborg 2002).

The sampling for interview follow two major principles which suggested by Rubin and Rubin (1995). First, to strive for the completeness, the respondents are purposely selected because they contributed their power to Umbrella movement, such as different levels of activism and participation in different factions of movement, rather than because their experiences are representative of the larger population (Klandermans and Staggenborg 2002). Most of the protesters had a high level of
activism and involvement. They both had the experience on occupying different areas. It is important to note that interviewees self-identified which factions they belonged. All of the interviewees identified themselves as protesters in Mong Kok. Also, I did not select the organizers (key leaders) of Umbrella movement, such as Benny Tai and Joshua Wong. It was because they were the key figures and thus tend to not share subjective experience on the Mong Kok faction of the movement which was not organized by them. Besides, I follow the second principle of similarity and dissimilarity (Rubin and Rubin 1995). Therefore, a pool of similarly situated respondents with different demographic characteristics was selected. 8 out of 12 respondents’ age are from 20 to 29. 7 out of 12 respondents are students.

This study relied on snowball sampling to identify a pool of respondents who fulfill the inclusion criteria because of the difficulty of accessing the subjects. Before the research, I know 4 out of 12 respondents who had high levels of involvement in Umbrella movement. Then they recommend their companion in the movement to me.

In this study, 12 samples were recruited until data saturation was reached. To facilitate rapport, the majority of interviews were conducted in a quiet area in City University of Hong Kong. To ensure the interests of both parties, before starting the interview, the research purpose was introduced and respondents signed a consent form. Since the illegal nature of umbrella movement, I hid the identity of interviewees. To handle the confidentiality issues, all documents and tapes from the interviews were destroyed.

ii) Data analysis

In my study, individual (protesters in Mong Kok) is the unit of analysis. My analysis begins with preset categories (cognition and environment). I relied on constant comparative analysis as the analytic strategy of my study because it is good for using pre-existing theory (preconceptions) to examine the empirical data from interviews (Thorne 2000).

After collecting raw data from semi-structured interviews, the data were analyzed step by step. I follow the analytical procedures from Strauss and Corbin (1990).
Coding (categorizing data) was the first phase of my analysis. I read the data and code them to preset categories (cognition and environment). Some data which did not fit the preset categories would be coded to new categories (peer influence and geographical advantage). Therefore, the data were sorted by categories. Then, within and between categories, the patterns and themes were identified. Also, I counted the number of times themes arise to show the relative importance. The final phase of analysis was the interpretation of results to explore the phenomenon and general an emergent theory. In the coding and interpretation process, the study used investigator triangulation to categorize the data. My two friends (who are also researchers) and I coded data independently and then compared categories to resolve divergences.

5. Findings

Each of the categories would be presented as sub-sections. My finding could be summarized as follows:

i) Social cognition

All of the respondents agreed cognition and external environmental conditions played a significant role in affecting their behaviors in occupied area of Mong Kok. One of the respondents (Age 30, male, blue-collar worker) said that “every times while the government tried to use coercion and clear the occupied area of Mong Kok, I came out to support because I believe the more occupied areas, the more bargaining power”. In addition, all of the respondents believed that their involvement in Mong Kok is valuable. A student (Age 23, male) noted that “there was relatively less resources in Mong Kok. They need my help”. A student (Age 20, female) described how the belief drove her contribution. “I could be a free-rider on the collective action, the umbrella movement. But I would not. I knew my single power is little, but the change would likely have occurred while the sum of people (protesters) power is strong. Hong Kong people decided the future of Hong Kong. I believed we could make a change”.

Also, most of the respondents did not favor the atmosphere of occupied area of Admiralty. They described the atmosphere had changed over time. A student (Age
20, male) was one of the most committed protesters in Umbrella movement. From the beginning of the movement, he occupied in Admiralty. Later, the atmosphere of Admiralty drove him to occupy in Mongkok. “From the first stage, I was happy that more and more people came out to support them and the movement. However, later, I found most of the protesters in Admiralty did not really know what was going on. The atmosphere in Admiralty looked like carnival”. His past experience in occupying in Admiralty affected his decision-making.

ii) Peer influence: comrade

“Comrade” was one of the variables determined their social behaviors. All of the respondents occupied with their comrades. Comrade refers to their partners of protest. A protester (Age 20, female, a university student) mentioned “it is very dangerous for a girl alone to occupy in Mong Kok, a place which is full of violence. Everyday, I saw the conflict between two parties, the supporters of movements and opposite of movements. I would not go there alone”. Some respondents were affected by their friends. “While I still decided which place I occupied, my friends called me to come there”. One even suggested that the support of comrade was the reason he lasted to protest. “Before the umbrella movement, we did not know each other. Umbrella movement brought us together. We met in internet and we decided to look at what happened in Mong Kok together. We protested together at all of the time by different forms, including ‘shopping’ and singing the song of happy birthday”.

iii) Uniqueness of Mong Kok: geographical advantage

Most of the respondents mentioned geographical advantages of Mong Kok were one of the reasons they selected to contribute their power in Mong Kok. The traffic of Mong Kok is well developed. There are buses, MTR and overnight minibuses. In other words, the accessibility of Mong Kok is extremely high. However, other occupied areas, including Admiralty and Causeway Bay, are relatively disadvantaged in terms of traffic. A respondent (age 21, male, a worker) who live in Tai Po mentioned that “after finishing work at 10p.m., I took minibus to Mong Kok and protested until 6 a.m. Then I walked about 5 minutes and took the first train back to my home. I bathed and slept until 12 p.m. And I worked again. It lasted for total 74 days”. Beyond, 6 out of 12 respondents pointed out that they were attracted by the diverse
classes in Mong Kok. Mong Kok is the most congested residential and shopping district. Compared with other occupied areas, there are different classes in Mong Kok and their standpoint toward Umbrella movement are diverse. There are also a lot of normal people in Mong Kok who is politically apathetic. In other words, the respondents hoped their involvement in Mong Kok could rise the awareness of the politically apathetic people. One of the respondents (Age 46, female, a PHD student) described contributing power in Mong Kok was much more “funny” because Mong Kok is “part of the reality of Hong Kong”. “I could interact with neighbors in Mong Kok. However, in other occupied areas, there are no neighborhood because there are no any residential districts”.

6. Discussion
My findings can be summarized as follows:
i) Social cognition is not the only determinant on geographical split of masses

To understand and analyze the decision-making of protesters, social cognition framework states cognition of people and external environmental situation determine “what a person becomes and can do which in turn affects subsequently behavior” (Davies 1962 pp.7). However, it ignored other variables which both affected the geographical decision-making of protesters. My empirical research on the protesters of Mong Kok during the Umbrella movement found out that protesters also take account of the “geographical advantage” and “partner of protest”.

The previous literatures of the social cognition school suggested that social cognition is a main factor affecting protest mobilization. All of the responders mentioned that the grievance and discontent about using excessive forces of the government drove them to contribute their power. This was same with the study of Hui (2015). The central question in my study is why some protesters selected to contribute their power to occupied area of Mong Kok, not other occupied areas. My empirical research found out social cognition also affects the geographical decision-making of the protesters. Some of the respondents mentioned that while government tried to clear the occupied area of Mong Kok, they came from other occupied areas to support and save the occupied area of Mong Kok because they believed the more occupied areas, the more bargaining power. For example, in 17 October 2014, after
police cleared the occupied area of Mong Kok, more than 3000 protesters returned and reoccupied the occupied area in Mong Kok.

ii) Geographical advantages

In this study, I found out a new insight which did not mention in previous studies on collective behaviors – geographical advantages. However, there is a precondition of this variable that potential protesters believe both of the areas fight for the same goals. It implies the geographical advantages are the integration of geographical and psychological perspectives. In the case of the Umbrella movement, some protesters viewed both of the occupied areas aimed at calling for democratic changes. Therefore, geographical advantages of Mong Kok, including well-developed traffic and the diversity of classes, became the pull factors drawing some protesters to come there.

My study extends the existing theory of social cognition which only take accounts of the social and psychological perspectives. While we study on the geographical split of masses within a social movement, it is necessary to take account of the geographical perspective – pull factors and push factors of a location. Logically, for the potential protesters, the push factors of Mong Kok could be regarded as the pull factors of other occupied areas. It implies that potential protesters would take account of the advantages and disadvantages of different occupied areas. For example, the dangerous environment of Mong Kok pushed some potential protesters decided to contribute their power in other relatively peaceful and organized occupied areas, such as Admiralty. However, there were still some pull factors of Mong Kok which attracted potential protesters, including well-developed traffic and the diversity of classes. For the protesters in Mong Kok, the advantages of occupying in Mong Kok were higher than the disadvantages of occupying in Mong Kok.

iii) Peer influence on creating psychological security

In previous studies on collective behaviors, the influence of “companion” and “comrade” did not been considered. My finding suggested that the peer would influence the geographical decision-making of protesters. Potential protesters were
more likely to contribute their power together with their acquaintances. It was because joining protests was a relatively risk behavior. Protesters who occupied with acquaintances would feel relatively familiar and experience low anxiety and stress. In the case of the Umbrella movement, Mong Kok was a dangerous occupied area because there were different episodes of violence against protesters (Hui 2015). It made the physical insecurity for protesters. However, protesting with acquaintances together made a sense of psychological security which counteracted the influence of the dangerous environment.

My study does not suggest protesters who participated with their acquaintances must occupy in a particular location, such as Mong Kok. In fact, there were also some protesters who occupied in Admiralty with their acquaintances. However, for the protesters in Mong Kok, participating with the acquaintances created an incentive for them to occupy in a relatively dangerous location. In other words, it was the necessary condition not sufficient condition.

iv) Implication for future study: the link between geographical split and strategic split?

As mentioned by Hui (2015), there was a split of masses toward the strategy of protest. Most of the protesters stayed at occupy sites peacefully while some impatient protesters wanted more “forceful” escalation. My research studies on the geographical split within the social movement and offers some explanations on why some protesters selected to contribute their power in Mong Kok, not other occupied area. Social cognition also the main but not the only factor affecting their geographical decision-making. Beyond, they took account of “geographical advantage” and “partner of protest”.

There is an interesting question for future study. Was there a link between geographical split and strategic split? In 15 December 2014, then-Commissioner of the Hong Kong Police Force, Andy Tsang announced that there were eight large-scale conflicts between protesters and policies during Umbrella movement (Standnews 2015). There were 5 out of 8 large-scale conflicts in occupied area of Mong Kok. The report from Police Force tend to support that forceful protesters were more likely to occupy in Mong Kok. However, during my semi-structured interviews, only a few of
the respondents described themselves as “forceful” protesters. My finding seems to break the link between two splits. Because of the limited time and resources, I did not further explore the link between them. In fact, there is a limitation of the methodology that interviewees might construct realities artificially. Therefore, my finding on the link between two splits might be not accurate. I look forward to review future literatures to address this.

7. Conclusion

This empirical research of 12 semi-structured interviews on the geographical decision-making of protesters in Umbrella movement expands the existing theory on collective actions. Traditionally, the social cognition school on explaining the collective actions only takes account of the individual cognition and external environmental situation. However, my study takes account of the social, psychological and geographical perspectives. I suggest social cognition also the main but not the only factor affecting their geographical decision-making. Potential protesters also take account of “geographical advantage” and “partner of protest”.

The geographical advantages for a particular location is the integration of ideas from geographical and psychological perspectives. The push factors of a particular location could be regarded as the pull factors of other location. Potential protesters take account of the geographical advantages and disadvantages of different occupied areas only while they believe both of the areas fight for the same goals.

Since participation in protests and social movements is a relatively risky behavior, therefore, by participating with acquaintances, protesters would feel relatively familiar and experience low anxiety and stress. It increases the psychological security of protesters. However, it is just a necessary condition not sufficient condition of geographical decision-making.

8. Limitation of study

Because of the limited resources and time, I only used a method to collect data – semi-structured interviews. Every method has its own limitation(s). Interviewees might artificially create realities (Kia andermans & Staggenborg 2002). Therefore, there
are some extent of failing to build the rapport to obtain accurate data. Triangulation is the most ideal strategy for data collection because it could increase the analytic comprehensiveness and counteracts “threats of validity associated with any one of the single methods” (Kiandermans & Staggenborg 2002 pp.111). It means researchers use a combination of several data-collection techniques to investigate the research question (Kiandermans & Staggenborg 2002). For understanding and analyzing the protesters of Mong Kok in Umbrella movement, the combination of semi-structured interviewing, participant observation and document analysis can be a useful means.

9. Acknowledgement

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11. Appendix

11.1: set of questions (Depended on the respond of interviewees, questions would be revised)

1. Demographic characteristics:
   - Age
   - Family background
   - Educational level
   - Monthly Income

2. General questions
   - How long did you protest during the Umbrella movement?
   - Why did you protest?
   - Where did you protest?
   - Why did you protest in Mong Kok?
   - How long did you protest in Mong Kok?
   - How did you view protesting in MK?
   - Was Mong Kok dangerous? Full of violence?
   - Did you protest with someone? E.g. fds or family
   - Did you protest in other occupied areas (e.g. Admiralty and Causeway Bay)?
   - Why did you choose to protest in MK, not other place? (the experience of central forces you to protest in MK?)
   - Why didn’t you protest in other areas?
   - How did you view about the other occupied area?
   - Did you involve in different social movement? Is it successful?
   - Did you agree with the nonviolent nature of umbrella movement?
   - Some radical activists used violence to fight for the democracy, do you agree them? (how did you view radical activists)
   - How do you view your contribution? (gd experience? Positive?)
   - Did you share with your experience with someone?
   - Did you affect someone’s behavior? E.g. joining the Umbrella movement?