

Project Work Written Report

Name: Chiang Yin Kit (6)

Class: 3i4

Group: 2-34

Title: Investigating the underlying factors for the Hong Kong protests (2019-2020).

Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 General Background:

After the 1997 of Hong Kong back to China, Beijing has continuously tried to increase her hegemony over the Special Administrative Region. These actions have been met with resistance by the Hongkongers. The 2019-2020 protests in Hong Kong were sparked by the introduction of the Fugitive Offenders and Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters Bill by the Hong Kong government. The bill was proposed to establish a mechanism for transfers of fugitives between Hong Kong and other parts of China, but provoked widespread criticism fearing the erosion of Hong Kong's legal system and its built-in safeguards against Beijing's interference. Despite the withdrawal of the extradition bill in September 2019, the Hong Kong protests continued into 2020, giving an indication that there were other factors which contributed to the protests besides the extradition bill. The literature on the 2019-2020 Hong Kong protests attributes it largely to the extradition bill and political grievances. However, is political discontent alone enough to mobilise the masses to protest? This paper will show otherwise, by showing that other factors, namely political opportunity, affluence, education and social networks are equally important factors which led to the Hong Kong protests.

1.2 Rationale and Objectives

The 2019-2020 Hong Kong protests started relatively recently. As such, there is limited existing literature which seeks to identify the causes of the 2019-2020 Hong Kong protests. This could lead to misconceptions about the factors which led to the Hong Kong protests. Moreover, the 2019-2020 Hong Kong protests have attracted immense international attention due to its big scale and long duration. Therefore, this paper aims to highlight the factors which have played an equally, or even more important role in the mass mobilisation of Hongkongers but have been rarely given any attention by current literature on the Hong Kong protests. In doing so, this paper will help to increase the level of understanding people have in general towards the 2019-2020 Hong Kong protests.

1.3 Research Questions

- i. Why do people protest?
- ii. Why do people in Hong Kong protest?
 - To what extent do political grievances affect the Hong Kong protests?
 - Does political opportunity affect the Hong Kong protests significantly?
 - What role do resources (affluence, education & social networks) have on protests?

1.4 Thesis Statement

Political opportunity is the single most important factor for the 2019-2020 Hong Kong protests.

1.5 Scope of Research

The scope of this paper will be limited to the factors of the 2019-2020 protests in Hong Kong which are directed towards the extradition bill. It would look predominantly at five factors: grievances, political opportunity, affluence, education and social networks. However, it will also include research on Hong Kong before 2019, which sets the background for the Hong Kong protests, as well as literature on the factors which affect protests generally.

1.6 Significance of Research

This paper presents a new perspective to the factors for the Hong Kong protests. In addition, it adds on to the existing literature on the factors for protests in general by looking into a new case study of the Hong Kong protests.

1.7 Limitations

This paper is limited in part due to the ongoing nature of the Hong Kong protests. Ergo, the current information available about the protests may not reflect the full situation in Hong Kong, limiting the accuracy of the paper. Moreover, there is a limited number of sources or academic papers available on the current situation in Hong Kong. As a result, some of the information may be inaccurate or only reflect a part of the full situation in Hong Kong. Another limitation is the lack of access to interviewing people from Hong Kong because of the physical constraints. This may compromise the accuracy of the paper.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.1 Factors for the Hong Kong protest

The literature on the Hong Kong protests is largely in agreement with one another, focusing on grievances as the main factor of the protests. The main contention among the literature on the Hong Kong protests is whether the main factor for the Hong Kong protests is the presence of political grievances or economic grievances. The factors for the Hong Kong protests also do not correspond to the literature on the factors for protest in general, with political and economic grievances being proposed as the main factors for the Hong Kong protests, while the factors for protest in general focus on grievances, political opportunity, affluence, education and social networks.

2.2 Political Grievances

2.2.1 Increased Restrictiveness of the Hong Kong Government

Much of the literature on the Hong Kong protests cites political discontent due to the extradition bill as the main cause of the protest (Lee et al, 2019). Ramzy and Li (2019), and Palmer (2019) find that the Hong Kong people fear that the legislation would subject residents of Hong Kong to the security forces and courts controlled by the ruling Communist Party on the mainland. The main reason for their lack of trust in the Hong Kong and Chinese government originates from the Tiananmen incident in 1989 (Chai 1990; Cheng 1990; Tsim 1991; Lam 1995; Ma 2015).

2.2.2 Accountability in Government

Peter (2019) finds, through a series of interviews with Hong Kong youths, that they feel that the government is not listening to the people and addressing their problems but instead becoming increasingly restrictive. They feel that this can be solved by universal

suffrage. This could explain why the hope for universal suffrage was an important factor for the Hong Kong protests (Lee et al, 2019). This view is also supported by Von (2019), who claims that people feel that without universal suffrage, there is nothing to ensure the accountability of the government. The literature on the causes of protests produces similar findings. Lehman and Ungar (1985) gather that protests are caused by the underrepresentation of a group and their grievances.

2.2.3 Importance of Political Discontent in Generating Protests

Given the amount of emphasis on political grievances as a main factor of the Hong Kong protests, it is expected that this would hold true for the literature on the causes of protests. However, the literature on the causes of protests is divided on whether political grievances can amount to protests. Opp and Kittel (2010) suggest that political discontent is a main reason for protest. However, this is disputed by Dalton et al (2010), who argue that there are many people around the world who have grievances, but do not resort to protests. Therefore, the political discontent in general is likely to be a contributing factor, but not the main factor, for the Hong Kong protests.

2.3 Economic Grievances

The economic grievances in Hong Kong have been a long-lasting topic of discussion (Tai-Lok 2014; Dapiran 2018). Nair (2019) believes that the economic grievances in Hong Kong are a major cause of the protests. The economic grievances can be split into two categories: 1. unaffordability and 2. competition with mainland immigrants

2.3.1 Unaffordability

The literature on the unaffordability in Hong Kong suggests that there is some build-up of frustration with the poor economic state of Hong Kong. Many Hongkongers blame the government for the high housing costs, lack of social mobility and rising inequality (Peter 2019; Pau 2019; Carroll 2019). Some proponents of economic grievances as the root cause of the protests even argue that protesters demand democracy so that it would lead to a more accountable government which can better address their economic problems (Nair, 2019).

2.3.2 Competition with Immigrants

Besides unaffordability, the increasing competition with immigrants worsens the situation in Hong Kong. Due to the increasing integration with the mainland Chinese economy, more mainland Chinese have migrated to Hong Kong and are competing with the locals for jobs. This in turn increases stress levels of Hongkongers, job insecurity and pushes wages lower. This problem has resulted in a further build-up of frustration with the Hong Kong government (Paramore 2019; Pau 2019). Lo (2019) further suggests that the Hong Kong protesters are anti-mainland Chinese immigration, which could be a reason why Hongkongers are so opposed to China.

2.3.2 Limitations of economic grievances as a factor

There are three limitations when considering economic grievances as a factor for the Hong Kong protests. Firstly, “if economic grievances are driving the protesters, they are remarkably silent about their true motives” (The Economist, 2019). The protesters are typically not heard complaining about their economic grievances. Secondly, a significant factor for protests in general is affluence (Dalton et al 2010; Dodson 2015). Therefore, economic problems in Hong Kong should reduce the number of people participating in the

protests. Ergo, it can be concluded that there would be a limited impact of economic grievances on the Hong Kong protests. Thirdly, research by Dalton et al (2010) and Lehman and Ungar (1985) on the factors for protests in general show that economic grievances do not affect protests significantly, contradicting those who claim that economic grievances are a main factor for the Hong Kong protests.

2.4 Synthesis and Comparison

According to the literature on protests, the factors which lead to protests can be divided into five main categories: grievances, political opportunity, affluence, education and social networks. One would expect each of these factors to be discussed with some emphasis in the case of the 2019-2020 Hong Kong protests. However, few academics on the factors for the Hong Kong protests have attributed it to factors beyond grievances. This has three problems. Firstly, it gives people an unbalanced perspective of the 2019-2020 Hong Kong protests. As Dalton et al (2010) argued, there are many people around the world who have grievances, but do not resort to protests. Solely focusing on grievances as a factor for the 2019-2020 Hong Kong protests compromises the level of understanding people have towards it. Secondly, the other four categories, namely political opportunity, affluence, education and social networks, are all significant factors which lead to protests in general (Dalton et al, 2010). Without addressing and evaluating these factors, it makes the literature on the Hong Kong protests incomplete. Thirdly, regarding economic grievances as a factor, there is a considerable amount of literature rejecting the notion that economic grievances have contributed to the Hong Kong protests. Therefore, this paper will address these three problems by re-examining the role of grievances as a factor for the Hong Kong protests, as well as evaluate the other three factors for protests on whether they are applicable to the 2019-2020 Hong Kong protests.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This paper will use the following theories to identify and evaluate the factors for the Hong Kong protests:

- Maslow's hierarchy of needs
- Relative deprivation theory
- Resource mobilisation theory
- Political opportunity theory

Maslow's hierarchy of needs is going to be used for this paper as it is best able to systematically categorise behavioural motivation in humans, which can be used to explain the motivations of the people protesting in Hong Kong. The subsequent three theories attempt to explain the reasons for protests. Relative deprivation theory suggests that protests are caused by grievances because people feel relatively deprived when comparing themselves to the rest of society. Resource mobilisation theory focuses on the effect of organisations and resources (time, money, skills) on protests, while political opportunity theory focuses on the effects of changes in the political system which creates an opportunity for people to push for social change.

This paper will predominantly be using secondary sources, such as books, newspapers and journals as its primary method of data collection and analysis. This paper will be using primary sources like statistical data and interviews with Hongkongers in smaller quantities, due to the difficulty of acquiring these sources.

Chapter Four: Discussion

4.1 Political Grievances

It is agreed that political grievances can cause protests to occur (Opp and Kittel, 2010). Without it, protests are unlikely to occur. This holds true for the case of the 2019-2020 Hong Kong protests (Lee et al 2019; Von 2019). According to the relative deprivation theory, people who lack necessities which their society deems as the norm would have grievances and thus protest (Longley, 2020). In the case of the 2019-2020 Hong Kong protests, the Hongkongers are used to the partly free political environment which they are living in. Any reduction of that right would cause them to feel relatively deprived, because they initially had more freedom. As one of Peter's interviewees put it, "Sometimes it feels like you are trapped. So for us, who are used to this kind of freedom, we might not get used to it." (Peter, 2019) Another reason for the relative deprivation felt by Hongkongers is the state of society in Hong Kong. Hong Kong is a developed region. Compared to other developed regions, Hong Kong falls short in terms of freedoms and rights (Freedom House, 2020). This may cause Hongkongers to feel relatively deprived compared to their counterparts in equally developed countries. However, political grievances are not the only factor in causing the 2019-2020 Hong Kong protests. This can be proved by using Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Maslow's hierarchy of needs systematically organises the different needs into a pyramid based on its importance, with the most important needs at the bottom tiers of the pyramid. Addressing political grievances would mainly fall under the top two levels of needs: Esteem needs and self-actualisation. Therefore, the level of importance of addressing political grievances is not very high. This is even more prominent when one weighs in the costs of protesting, which include time and energy just to name a few, which can both be spent on achieving more crucial needs in the lower tiers of the pyramid. Hence, political grievances are not the only factor needed for the mobilisation of protesters in Hong Kong.

4.2 Political Opportunity

Political opportunity does not focus on the motivations for protests, but on the costs of protests. According to the theory, the success of social movements is impossible without political opportunity (Crossman, 2019). Political opportunity is the extent of ease in mobilising people to protest. Opportunities arise when a system experiences vulnerability due to increasing political pluralism, reduced political repression, disunity among the elites or increased political rights of citizens. Eisinger (1972) believes that protest is most common in countries with mid-level openness. This means that the amount of political opportunity in the country is in the middle, with the government not being too repressive, but also not giving too much freedom. Hong Kong perfectly fits this situation. According to Freedom House (2020), Hong Kong was considered a partly free territory. A report on press freedom in the world by Reporters Without Borders (2020) also finds that Hong Kong ranked around the middle compared to other countries in terms of press freedom. In Hong Kong, there are certain restrictions on the freedoms that the Hongkongers are entitled to. Conventional channels of feedback to the government are limited, and the representation of the peoples' voices are limited because of the restricted voting process, which requires the chief executive to be approved by the mainland government. This creates a disconnect between the people and government, making the government unrepresentative of the people and their concerns. Therefore, the government is unable to create policies which address the problems which Hongkongers face, making them come across as not listening to the people (Peter, 2019). Nevertheless, there are still certain political opportunities in Hong Kong, like the right to protest. While Hong Kong did have some restrictions in terms of the opportunity to protest, such as the cases of police retaliation and arrests, the arrests and physical harm on most of the protesters are not a lot because there is strength in numbers. In the case of Hong Kong, there are too many protesters for all of them to be arrested or retaliated against. Furthermore, when expressing their grievances, the Hongkongers have no choice but to

seize the opportunity to protest because other methods of feedback are even more restricted. Hence, political opportunity remains a key factor in the Hong Kong protests.

4.3 Affluence

The resource mobilisation theory argues that the success of social movements depends on resources (time, money, skills, etc.) and the ability to use them (Crossman, 2020). Affluence ensures that protesters have monetary resources. The more affluent the citizens of a country, the more likely some of the resources would be used in social movements which they support (Dalton et al 2010; Dodson 2015). Hong Kong is widely known as one of the Four Asian Tigers, getting that title because of its economic success. This success is reflected in income and employment statistics regarding Hong Kong. Hong Kong currently ranks 17 in terms of average income (WorldData.info n.d.). Besides having a respectable average monthly income, the average monthly salaries of Hongkongers have also been increasing since July 2017 until July 2019 (TRADING ECONOMICS, 2020), which was the time when the protests started. The unemployment rate in Hong Kong was also relatively low at 2.9% in July 2019 (TRADING ECONOMICS, 2020). Therefore, most Hongkongers would meet the basic needs in the hierarchy of needs (e.g. food, water, shelter). This prompts them to think about pursuing needs in the higher levels of the hierarchy, which include addressing political grievances in the form of protest. This means that the protests in Hong Kong, or in any other semi-open country, are bound to increase as the level of affluence increases. Before the 2000s, there were few protests in Hong Kong (Duhalde & Huang, 2019). However, combined with other factors, the frequency and scale of protests increased along with the increasing affluence of Hong Kong.

4.4 Education

Education is found to increase protest significantly (Somma 2010; Dalton et al 2010; Dodson 2015). 77.9% of the Hong Kong protesters were found to have tertiary education in a survey conducted by Lee et al (2019). Education is an important factor which contributes to protest because it creates awareness about political and social issues. Most of the educated are the people who understand about the importance of democracy, freedom of expression and human rights. Therefore, when the Hong Kong government is seen to be infringing on the rights of the Hongkongers, the protesters have the moral high ground, which is one of the key resources for the mobilisation of people for protests. The framing of the goal which the protesters are working towards appeals to the educated Hongkongers, in turn garnering support for the protests.

4.5 Social Networks

While one would expect the 2019-2020 Hong Kong protests to be largely organised by organisations or leaders, the 2019-2020 Hong Kong protests have been described as leaderless and decentralised (Ag 2019; Sum 2019). The social networks in Hong Kong were not the conventional organisational networks, but instead were the social networks established through personal relationships (Lee et al, 2019). Many of the Hongkongers protested with their friends, schoolmates, family members or colleagues. Nevertheless, conventional political groups and their leaders still played a supportive role in the protests (Lee et al, 2019). Protest activities were also coordinated through social media and online platforms. This unique feature of the protests could be a factor for the protests. Personal relationships (friendships and familial relationships) have been argued to be important in the mobilisation for protests (Opp & Kittel 2010; Somma 2009). This could be because the strengthening of relationships through participating in activities like protests together are an added incentive for protesters.

4.6 Economic Grievances

Despite economic grievances being proposed by Nair (2019), Paramore (2019) and Pau (2019) as a factor for the 2019-2020 Hong Kong protests, the rejection of economic grievances as a factor of the 2019-2020 Hong Kong protests is equally compelling, with many rejecting the possibility of economic grievances being a factor for protests (Dalton et al 2010, Dodson 2015, The Economist 2019, Lehman and Ungar 1985). Therefore, economic grievances can be considered as a less important factor for the 2019-2020 Hong Kong protests compared to the other factors.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

In conclusion, the 2019-2020 Hong Kong protests can be said to be caused by several factors, including political grievances, political opportunity, affluence, education and social networks. The single most important factor for the 2019-2020 Hong Kong protests is political opportunity. As long as Hong Kong maintains the right for its people to protest, there will be more protests in Hong Kong. This is because other methods of feedback have many more restrictions. A majority of the government is dominated by pro-China politicians, which does not accurately reflect the sentiments on the ground, causing the Hongkongers to turn to protests as the best option available. While political grievances are important in mobilising the protesters in Hong Kong, it is still secondary to political opportunity. If Hongkongers were to be deprived of the right to protest, and clamped down harshly upon for protesting, mass mobilisation would not be possible even when there are political grievances. Political grievances were the trigger factor for the 2019-2020 Hong Kong protests. This finding brings about the likelihood that protests in Hong Kong is always a timebomb, waiting to happen. Whenever there is an issue which generates a substantial amount of grievances within the community, there will be protests because the political opportunity is present. In fact, due to the aloofness of the Hong Kong leaders, they cannot empathise with the people on the ground. As a result, they are prone to making unpopular decisions for the country. Hence, being a political office holder in Hong Kong is like navigating through a minefield, where any misstep would lead to discontent which leads to the protests.

Whenever people make decisions, most of them would perform a cost-benefit analysis. This is the same when deciding whether to engage in protest activity. In the case of Hong Kong, the benefits would be the likelihood of some form of political reform to address the political grievances which Hongkongers have. The costs would come in the form of time, energy and potential counteractions taken by those in positions of authority. For protest to be made a more compelling option than inaction, the benefits will have to outweigh the costs. This is where the other three factors come to play. Affluence reduces the cost of protesting

because material resources are given less value (and therefore less priority) due to the law of diminishing marginal utility (i.e. as people get richer and richer, the marginal utility of each dollar to that person decreases). This would lead to them to put more priority on other things which they deem important, which includes political openness. However, affluence is not as important as political opportunity because political opportunity reduces the costs of protesting more than affluence, by reducing physical threats like being arrested by the police. Education is even less significant when compared to political opportunity. The role education plays is to change the mindsets of Hongkongers to be more inclined to political openness. This shift in priorities increases the perceived benefits of protests but is not as important when compared to the costs reduced by political opportunity. Social networks also fall behind political opportunity because the incentive of strengthening of the relationships when engaging in protests is less important than the costs reduced by political opportunity in Hong Kong. Therefore, this paper concludes that the most important factor for the Hong Kong protests is political opportunity, because it has the greatest impact on the decision making of Hongkongers on whether to protest. This is because it reduces the most costs, which trumps all the benefits and reduced costs that the other four factors bring about.

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