

Student Activism in Contrasting 'Spaces of Autonomy': A Comparison of Social
Movements Originating in Japan, Hong Kong, and the UK

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Student activism in contrasting ‘spaces of autonomy’: a comparison of social movements originating in Japan, Hong Kong, and the UK

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Abstract:

This paper presents an exploratory comparative analysis of contemporary student movements in three different contexts: Japan, Hong Kong, and the UK. The Japanese case explores a student-led movement known as SEALDs that mobilized within a nationally-bounded context in response to domestic political issues. The case of Hong Kong’s Umbrella Movement explores student-led activism focused on ongoing and evolving local issues in the complex cross-border context of China’s ‘one country-two systems’ policy. The third case looks at the Extinction Rebellion (XR), a climate change-focused social movement that originated in the UK but soon occupied a global space. An analytical framework is applied to juxtapose and compare these movements that considers 1) the degrees by which human actors, policies and institutions in the higher education systems in each case support, tolerate or discourage student activism; 2) the broader social and political contexts in each case country and the ways these influence and respond to the social movements; and 3) the impact and use of place and transnational networked space that enable these movements to exist in what Manuel Castells calls ‘spaces of autonomy’. Findings indicated a number of noteworthy commonalities across these contrasting cases as well as notable distinctive characteristics, suggestive of the contextualized influences of higher education and broader societal forces. The paper concludes with a discussion of this exploratory study’s limitations and our intentions for further empirical research.

Keywords: *student activism, higher education, social movements, spaces of autonomy*

Introduction

Scholarly interest in student movements has tended to ebb and flow over time, arguably reaching its zenith during the worldwide spread of student activism in the 1960s and 70s. Although student activism is a global phenomenon, scholarship has tended to focus on analyses of individual movements in particular spatial and temporal contexts (Weiss, Aspinall, & Thompson, 2012). There is also a reported lack of theoretical or comparative research that explores the constitutive effects and social impacts of student activism across contexts (ibid.,

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2012). This paper aims to begin addressing this gap by comparing and theorizing about three contemporary student-led social movements occupying different spatialities. Of particular interest are 1) the degrees by which the actors, policies and institutions in the higher education systems in each case support, tolerate or discourage student activism; 2) the broader social and political contexts in each case country and the ways these influence and respond to the social movements; and 3) the impact and use of place (geo-spatial, material, and socially constructed) in these movements and the transnational spaces and networked connections that enable these groups to organize and share their stories both internally and internationally.

Three cases were selected for comparison. The first case explores a student movement known as ‘Students Emergency Action for Liberal Democracy’ (SEALDs) that arose at a particular historical moment in Japan in response to controversial domestic policies put forward by the ruling conservative Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). The second case of Hong Kong’s Umbrella Movement explores student-led activism focused on ongoing and evolving local issues in the complex cross-border context of China’s ‘one country-two systems’ policy. The third case looks at the Extinction Rebellion (XR), a climate change-focused social movement that originated in the UK but soon occupied a global space. These cases will be juxtaposed and discussed in light of the following guiding research questions:

1. What are the distinctive features of these student-initiated social movements?
2. In what ways do academics, universities and societies influence, and support or discourage, these movements in each of the three contexts?
3. In what ways do these movements utilize local place and transnational space to achieve their objectives, and what are the reciprocal influences of place and space on these movements?
4. What commonalities and differences can be identified among these cases, and what contextual factors might explain these findings?

The paper begins with an operationalization of key terms and brief discussion of relevant conceptual lenses through which analysis of the three cases was conducted. Case study

descriptions follow in turn and address the first three research questions. These are followed by a brief discussion that attempts to address the final question.

Analytical Framework

In order to compare student-led activist movements it is essential to establish a clear understanding of what is meant by the terms ‘student’ and ‘student-led activism’. While social movements abound that are developed and maintained by actors that have no connection to formal modes of education, student movements make up a substantial sub-category of social activism that has manifested repeatedly across time and place over the last 100 years (Crossley & Ibrahim, 2012). For the purposes of this study, *students* will refer to individuals who were involved in some form of formal education at the time they became active in the social movements under study. Furthermore, student leadership in each case has been connected in some capacity to *higher* education. As such the influence of higher education institutions and systems in each case will be given particular consideration. *Student-led activism* will be defined as a form of activism in which students have a leadership role in the development of the social movement in question and comprise a large part of the population of participating activists. This differs from social movements that have existed which were comprised solely of students to the exclusion of other members of society (Weiss et al., 2012).

Characteristics of student activism

Fundamental questions in student activism research include ‘*why* do students protest, why do they protest *as* students, and what sort of commonalities or organic linkages exist *across* student bodies?’ (Weiss et al., 2012, p. 2). Some explanations point to the particular social status that those who embody the social category of ‘student’ enjoy in society. Analytically, students can be viewed alternatively as ‘*strategic groups*’ – “a loosely structured category formed

around shared material or ideal interests”; ‘*professionals/pre-professionals*’ – “those who possess the most modern knowledge about society and thus serve as its intelligentsia”; or ‘*marginal elites*’ – “producers of collective goods who are supported by the larger community but live together apart from it, are recruited to (or self-nominated) for and formally admitted to that status, enjoy special privileges and immunities, and are governed by unique rules” (Weiss et al., 2012, pp. 10-11).

Even during times when large groups of students become involved in activism, generally these make up only a small proportion of the total student population. Students “tend to be politically aware, interested, and active in sharply decreasing degrees” (Emmerson, 1968, p. 390). As such, the identities, issues and motivations that prompt particular students to action, as well as the broader social contexts in which they engage in activism are worthy of scholarly attention.

Students are often concentrated geographically on campuses, in capital or other large cities. These same cities often dominate politics, so students’ urban position enables them to play roles on the political stage (Altbach, 1982, cited in Weiss et al, 2012). In addition to the benefits of a typically urban positionality, students engaged in extra-curricular activities in sports and various other clubs often form close bonds that can be mobilized for protest. University campuses also provide an opportunity for the creation social capital among students through informal personal networks that develop in university dormitories, cafeterias and other shared spaces (Weiss et al., 2012). As such, in combination with the ideas of student social roles described above,

geographical concentration and proximity to power, disproportionate influence and perceived elite status, and integration in multiple organizational structures combine with preprofessional status, limited responsibilities, and their cognizance of the gap between ideals and reality – to make students one of the most highly mobilized groups in society (Weiss et al., 2012, pp. 12-13).

In this paper we sought to explore this ‘highly mobilized group’ in three contrasting social contexts, with the hope of identifying salient commonalities and differences. One of the main social contexts we sought to better understand was the higher education systems that endowed these activists their ‘student’ status.

The social role of universities

Studies have shown that being a *university* student in particular can have politicizing effects that can translate into active civic engagement (Crossley & Ibrahim, 2012). Higher education institutions and systems play significant and varied roles in societies, and the worldwide massification of tertiary education since the 1970s points to the growing recognition by governments and families of the social importance of universities (Marginson, 2016; Trow, 2010). As higher education expands worldwide, student-led activism has the potential to expand in kind and have increasing impacts on societies.

Higher education typically serves two primary functions; the provision of teaching and learning and the production of research-based knowledge. Today, the underlying goals regarding the intended social outcomes of these functions are typically bound up with nation-state strategies for economic development. However, the medieval European universities developed as cosmopolitan institutions and embodied a “wandering scholar model” characterized by autonomy and freedom from state control (Kerr, 1990, p. 7). As European models of higher education spread worldwide through colonization and borrowing, so too did the Humboldtian ethos of academic freedom and the Anglo-Saxon emphasis on the development of the ‘whole person’ through liberal education. In this respect, higher education in many contexts has the inherent capacity to serve as a ‘democratic public sphere’ offering students “the opportunity to

involve themselves in the deepest problems of society, to acquire the knowledge, skills, and ethical vocabulary necessary for modes of critical dialogue and forms of broadened civic participation” (Giroux, 2002, p. 451).

The degree by which universities are actually able to provide this space for critical public dialogue is a matter of debate, however, as contemporary universities and systems are increasingly shaped by “state-driven neoliberal reforms and strategies for global competitiveness” (Hammond, 2016, p. 556). The influence of neoliberalism has arguably redefined higher education in recent decades through processes of commodification, marketization, and corporatization, posing a threat to the ability of universities to provide spaces for critical civic engagement (Giroux, 2002; Hammond & Keating, 2017; Olssen & Peters, 2005). In spite of these developments, university students in a range of national contexts continue to engage in social activism. An important consideration is the degrees by which university actors and policies support or constrain these forms of civic participation.

Use and influence of place and networked space

In addition to the roles of higher education institutions in relation to student-led activism, we are interested in this study in the broader roles of place and networked space in experiences of student-led movements. With regard to ‘place’, we acknowledge that all social phenomena are emplaced, “constituted in part through location, material form, and their imaginings” (Appadurai, 1996; Gieryn, 2000, p. 467). Furthermore, place is “not merely a setting or backdrop, but an agentive player in the game – a force with detectable and independent effects on social life” (Werlen, 1993, cited in Gieryn, 2000, p. 466). This view aligns with ideas from actor-network theory (ANT) which posits that human actors are one of a plethora of agents that exist and operate within regenerative, evolving networks of relations (Latour, 2007). Actors,

in this sense, can include humans, non-human animals and inanimate objects, all of which are capable of serving as ‘mediators’ which have transformative potential to alter forces that pass through their respective networks. From this theoretical perspective, analytical queries can be constructed such as: how do student activists select, occupy and repurpose places, and what tools and materials do they make use of? Likewise, how do these physical places, organizational structures and social imaginings facilitate and otherwise influence student activism through their own forms of agency?

In addition to university campuses as places in which students can mobilize for social change, the places that activists utilize for demonstrations and forms of civil disobedience are worthy of analysis. Location selection and the activities that ensue therein which repurpose public spaces have important ramifications for the social impact and public perceptions of collective action. Likewise the characteristics of chosen places can exert agentive, independent effects on activists and other human actors (such as police).

In addition to recognizing the agency of place, the nature and influence of networks that connect actors in evolving webs of transformative relationships are worthy of consideration when analyzing student activism, particularly in the age of communicative globalization.

Networks are all around us, and we are ourselves, as individuals, the units of a network of social relationships of different kinds and, as biological systems, the delicate result of a network of biochemical reactions. Networks can be tangible objects in the Euclidean space, such as electric power grids, the Internet, highways or subway systems, and neural networks. Or they can be entities defined in an abstract space, such as networks of acquaintances or collaborations between individuals (Boccaletti, Latora, Moreno, Chavez, & Hwang, 2006, p.177).

The concept of networks as an analytical tool is useful to conceive of the ways social movements can expand out across national borders and other bounded contexts.

Methodologically, theories like ANT are helpful to push social science away from oversimplified attempts at identifying singular causal factors that create social phenomena. Instead, all social developments are conceived of as the result of intricate and evolving networked relationships, and the goal for research is the detailed description and understanding of these relations.

Crossley and Ibrahim suggest that in addition to the university providing a space in which a large population of students can lead to a politicizing ‘critical mass’ of potential activists, collective action emerges only when such students are networked (Crossley & Ibrahim, 2012).

They explain:

Activism is rooted in distinctive situational definitions, values and frameworks of meaning which, in order to be real for any individual actor, must be real for a network of others who will confirm that sense of reality for her. Likewise, activist identities must be recognized by similarly inclined others in order to feel real to the actor (Crossley, 2011, cited in Crossley & Ibrahim, 2012, p. 599).

Social movements in the contemporary age entail complex interactions within and between abstract networks of human actors and that of the Internet and other communication channels that allow for rapid information exchange in real-time. Globalized communication allows for the activities of activists to be broadcast and otherwise shared globally, enabling for the garnering of support from diaspora and other communities. These broader technological and communicative developments in society thus warrant a novel approach to the study of networked social movements.

‘Spaces of autonomy’

For the purposes of this study, we adopt a conceptual frame developed by sociologist Manuel Castells called ‘spaces of autonomy’. Castells describes this as a “hybrid of cyberspace and

urban space”, whereby autonomy can be ensured “by the capacity to organize in the free space of communication networks, but at the same time can only be exercised as a transformative force by challenging the disciplinary institutional order by reclaiming the space of the city for its citizens” (Castells, 2013, p. xi). Here Castells usefully combines notions of place and networked space into a single analytical frame. Furthermore, the role of the ‘city’ is recognized as a key element for mobilization and a central place of belonging where spatio-temporal order creates a political imaginary (Harvey, 2012), considering that “political meaning is given to the cityscape when residents exercise their freedom of expression such as protest or demonstration.” (Tam, 2018, p. 85). Castells further suggests that social movements in the contemporary age are both simultaneously local and global. He writes:

They begin in specific contexts, for their own reasons, and build their own networks and construct their own public space by occupying urban space and connecting to Internet networks. In this sense, they are local, but they are also global, because they are connected throughout the world, and they learn from and are inspired by others’ experiences. Furthermore, they engage in ongoing global debate on the Internet, and sometimes call for joint, global demonstrations in a network of local spaces in simultaneous time (Castells, 2013, p. xi).

While this is indeed true of most social movements in the age of global communication, we argue that social movements vary in the degrees by which they emphasize the local and the global. Furthermore, the dominant global language of the Internet is English, and as such social movements that operate in languages other than the *lingua franca* may have less capacity for global expansion. We also suggest that issues taken up by particular movements can have more local/national or global orientations, thereby influencing the purpose and appeal of extending social movements into the global space. These are dynamics we sought to compare in this study. In this respect, we adopt the notion of ‘spaces of autonomy’ as a useful frame by which to analyze and compare the activities of the movements selected as cases, including the ways and degrees by which they manifest in local or global dimensions.

Case study selection

Having clarified what is meant by students and student-led activism and presenting the analytical framework of higher education, place and networked space, the paper now turns to a description and discussion of the selected cases. One deciding factor that led to the selection of the three cases was the varying levels of boundedness of the issues and activities of the social movements under study, or to use Castells' concept, the varying local/global manifestations of spaces of autonomy. In each case the student movements engaged with issues that had both immediate relevance at the local and global levels. For the case of SEALDs (Japan), the specific issues and activities taken up by the group were decidedly focused on national politics, but the group's underlying values of participatory democracy had global implications. The case of Hong Kong presents an outlier of sorts, in that it represents issues relevant to the citizens of Hong Kong but transcends the city limits to engage with mainland China and the tensions inherent in the 'One country, two systems' policy. From the global perspective, the case represents the notions of liberal democracy against authoritarianism as represented by China's CCP. The UK's Extinction Rebellion engages with the perceived ineffectiveness of the British government to address carbon emissions, but the issue of global climate emergency and the expansiveness of the movement are decidedly global in nature. Thus, the selection of national, 'cross-border' and global spatialities was recognized as a novel set of cases that could provide for meaningful juxtaposition and comparison.

A further line of inquiry connects to the nature of higher education in each context. Serving as a British colony for 155 years (1842-1997), universities in Hong Kong have been influenced by the British approach to higher education. While Japan borrowed heavily from European and American models, its higher education system was developed primarily for the purposes of augmenting industrial modernization and to 'catch up' with the West. As such, the degrees by

which higher education is seen as a ‘democratic public sphere’ and supportive of student activism was deemed an interesting element for comparison across the three cases.

Nationally-bounded activism: SEALDs in Japan

‘Students Emergency Action for Liberal Democracy’ (SEALDs) was formed in 2015 as a nonpartisan student-led social movement that opposed a number of controversial policies of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and his Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). Many SEALDs members pointed to the 3/11 Great Japan Earthquake and Tsunami and the subsequent mishandling of the nuclear meltdown at Fukushima by the government as a major catalyst for raising political awareness and developing an interest in activism (Slater, O’Day, Uno, Kindstrand, & Takano, 2015). On the foundations of this heightened awareness, one of the initial impetuses that mobilized the founders of the group was the ‘Act on Protection of Specified Secrets’, also known as the Secrecy Law. This law effectively gave:

ministries and agencies, including the Defense Ministry and the Nuclear Regulation Authority, the power to classify information in areas such as diplomacy and counterterrorism as ‘state secrets’. The law subjects leakers to up to 10 years in prison and those who try to obtain secrets, including journalists, to five years behind bars. (Osaki, 2014, para. 10)

The Secrecy Law sparked widespread controversy due to its potentially ambiguous applicability and severity, and led to Japan dropping a dramatic 31 places in the RSF World Press Freedom ranking from 22 to 53 (Reporters Without Borders, 2019). Even though as much as 80% of Japan’s population opposed the law, the Abe administration pushed the legislation through the Diet (Osaki, 2014). Prior to the formation of SEALDs, the same group of core students originally created a movement specifically opposed to this law called ‘Students Against Secret Protection Law’ (SASPL) in early 2014. In spite of demonstrations outside the

Diet of as many as 60,000 protesters, the law came into effect in December of that year and SASPL was disbanded.

However, the Abe Administration's subsequent set of bills concerning a controversial reinterpretation of Article 9 of Japan's pacifist Constitution once again galvanized the group, leading to the formation of SEALDs on May 3rd (celebrated as Constitution Day in Japan) of 2015 (Slater et al., 2015). In addition to the ideal of 'constitutionalism', SEALDs also focused their efforts on issues such as social security, wealth disparity, democracy and pacifism. SEALDs held weekly demonstrations outside the Diet that began in the hundreds but ended up culminating in a protest on August 30th comprising an estimated 120,000 participants (Kingston, 2015; Slater et al., 2015). However, the protests could not prevent the passage of the security bills into legislation and the group dissolved in August 2016, while group leaders stated in various media platforms that SEALDs protests marked the path for future activism and mobilization in Japan.

The ability for SEALDs to mobilize large numbers of Japanese youth is noteworthy. While Japan has a long history of student activism that reached its peak in the 1960s and 1970s, the bubble economy years and subsequent stagnation of Japan's economy ushered in a period characterized by youth who were largely apolitical and uninterested in grassroots organizing. Furthermore, the violent turn taken by many student groups in previous generations (arguably a reaction to increases in aggressive police tactics) diminished public support and created a negative image of protesting in the minds of many Japanese (Steinhoff, 2012). SEALDs' ability to mobilize large numbers is in part attributed to their ability to 'normalize' protest in the eyes of the public and the media, dispelling the stigma of radicalism through an effective marketing campaign characterized by pop-culture appeal, cooperating with the police, and ideals of

reform over revolution. However, the typical propensity for students to utilize their local university networks to mobilize did not manifest in the Japanese case. SEALDs members reported the challenges of recruiting or even discussing their involvement in the group among their peers at university. According to Slater et al., (2015, p. 14):

people join social movements most often because others they know have already joined. SEALDs, despite being a collection of college students, does not [sic] much recruit from their own college campuses. Instead...they are more likely to keep their involvement from family, peers and classmates who are not participants. ...SEALDs face the challenge of recruiting members and mobilizing support through their websites and political events, such as demos, rather than politicizing the institutional connections already existing in their lives, such as school and work. When we asked one core member if they would like to present SEALDs to the class, the response was quick. "No, not at all. I don't want them to think that I am dangerous or crazy." While going to demonstrations has become less stigmatized, most young people remain hesitant to share such political interest with others outside of the context of the demonstrations. Members report that everyone has lost friends when it became known that they participated in demonstrations.

In the Japan case it appears that the university networks typically utilized by students go untapped due to the persistent social stigma toward activism and being interested in politics in general. Instead, SEALDs members utilized cyberspace to mobilize participants. According to Slater et al., "The appearance of overt and strong political sentiment both frightens and repels many college students, and social media provides a sort of safe zone for them" (Slater et al., 2015, p. 15). In Japan, the free space of communication networks provided by social media platforms appears an essential factor in enabling the mobilization of students who would otherwise be unwilling to appear 'dangerous or crazy' by showing an interest in politics. In addition to these social dynamics, Slater et al also point to competitive university entrance exams and the subsequent formalized job-hunting process that bookend university life as factors that impede civic participation among many students. They add:

Moreover, these activities are largely isolating, pitting students against each other in a competitive process of invidious comparison rather than finding common cause with

fellow students. Thus, the structural expectations mitigate against, rather than provide open possibilities for political reflection and mobilization (Slater et al., 2015, p. 13).

These ‘structural expectations’ highlight the interconnected nature of higher education and broader society in Japan. With the entrance exam system, high school students focus intensively on rote learning at the expense of developing critical thinking and political awareness. In addition to the substantial amount of time required to take part in the job-hunting process, participation in protests has acquired a further social stigma as an activity that could hamper students’ chances of securing a job after graduation. In these respects, being a university student in Japan is not conducive to developing a civic identity and taking an active role in social activism.

This was not always the case. Higher education itself has undergone dramatic changes in its relation to student activism throughout its history (for a comprehensive history see Steinhoff, 2012). In the early post-War period, students were able to form self-government organizations on their campuses, with elected student representatives from each faculty, and these organizations formed a national level organization in 1948 called ‘Zengakuren’³ (Steinhoff, 2012). During this period, powerful student organizations banded with faculty to resist American Occupation purges of faculty members who were labeled communists, and universities supported students by forbidding police to enter university campuses without an invitation from the administration (ibid.). The relationship between student groups and the University changed however during the late 60s and early 70s when clashes between protesters and police took a violent turn, contributing to “long-term damage to student autonomy and self-government at universities and also to public attitudes toward student activism (Steinhoff, 2012, p. 75). Andrews succinctly documents this change on university campuses:

³ Zengakuren stands for ‘All- Japan Federation of Student Self- Government Organizations’ (Steinhoff, 2012).

It was once taboo for police to enter campuses after the 1952 Poporo Incident at the University of Tokyo, though this was broken during the Anpo 1960 campaign and then utterly shattered in the events of the late 1960s. The government passed new legislation giving it more control over public universities, beginning the slow but inevitable process of sanitising campuses into their current ossified states — so much so that by the last decade, universities were removing the bases and infrastructures that had allowed the far-left factions ... to thrive, and even the large boards which students would once fill with impassioned political slogans and messages on campus. The situation on campuses today is so tense that any political act is potentially dangerous (Andrews, 2016).

...the grim reality is that holding a campus strike is rewarded with arrests and expulsions, and... entering a campus to distribute flyers is a newsworthy offence that merits police action. A way around the trespassing problem is to be a student actually enrolled at the university, of course, but then you might be punished for promoting an unauthorised organisation (Andrews, 2018).

In recent years, instead of embracing the newfound energy for political engagement among Japanese youth, universities have cracked down on student activism on their campuses. This is evidenced primarily through processes of ‘beautification’ of university campuses in ways that discourage activism, such as the banning of political signboards (*tatekan*) and evicting some of the ‘bastions’ of long-standing student groups. As universities have proven to be unwelcome spaces for cultivating student civic engagement, groups such as SEALDs recognized the free space of communication networks as their primary means of mobilization.

SEALDs utilized a number of online media tools including their own website, Twitter, Facebook and YouTube, as well as widely-used smartphone instant messaging app called LINE for organizing demonstrations. The group also created demonstration poster templates that could be downloaded and printed out with ease at Japan’s ubiquitous convenience stores, enabling demonstrators across the country to march with signs nationwide in a consistent design style.

With regard to the transformative space of the city, the group organized street protests in the city of Tokyo, although SEALDs had various branches in Nagoya, Kansai and Okinawa. Surrounding the National Diet Building became a primary location and a symbol of resistance against the state, personified in posters and slogans in the image of PM Abe Shinzo. The repurposed urban space became a site for public sharing of personal stories, call-and-response chants, rapping, and other forms of musical expression (Slater et al., 2015). These expressive forms also found their way online, with a professionally produced hip-hop music video and other documentary films being uploaded to YouTube and the groups' website. As university campuses were not perceived to offer the same opportunities for mobilization, student activists in Japan went online to organize and utilized the city space to act.

Cross-border activism: Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement

Understanding the case of Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement requires an explanation of the unique social and political context in which this movement arose. A former British colony, Hong Kong has been designated as a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of the People's Republic of China since 1997 after the transfer of sovereignty from the UK. In 1984, the bilateral Sino-British Declaration was signed, stating that the economic system and way of life in Hong Kong would remain unchanged until 2047 under the cross-border context of China's "One country, two systems" principle, outlined in Hong Kong's constitution (called the Basic Law). As such Hong Kong has enjoyed a high degree of autonomy and executive, legislative, and independent judicial power in comparison to mainland China. At the same time, Hong Kong is a partially-democratic system or a "hybrid regime" (Fong, 2017), being in between a democracy and an authoritarian regime. There is freedom of assembly and demonstration, and the Basic Law provides the aim to have a fully elected Legislative Council (LegCo) and universal suffrage. However, as of this writing political rights and civil liberties remain under

threat or deficient (FreedomHouse, 2019). For example, there are no free elections. The Chief Executive is to be elected by the Election Committee, comprised of a total number of 1,200 pro-Beijing representatives (Chan, 2014).

Over the past 30 years, there has been an upsurge in political activism and feelings of self-determination among the people of Hong Kong, although the region has traditionally been considered a "politically apathetic society" (Lee & Chan, 2011, p. 207). The democratic movement and social protests in Hong Kong which have been rising in recent years can be in part explained because of the sovereignty, fundamental civil rights and political freedoms guaranteed by the Sino-British Joint Declaration and the Basic Law, as well as the fear that Hong Kong may lose its autonomy, civil rights and become one more city of mainland China (Hung & Ip, 2012, p. 572).

In 2013, a law professor at Hong Kong University named Benny Tai published a piece entitled "The most lethal weapon of civil disobedience" in the *Hong Kong Economic Journal*, criticizing the government and urging for a democratic reform and the need to occupy Central, the financial and business district of Hong Kong (Lee, 2015b). On September 28 in 2014, Tai, joined by other professors, announced the peaceful Occupy Central Movement that evolved into the so-called Umbrella Movement. The name of it originated when police started to use tear gas against the protesters; this brought more people to support the students who used umbrellas to protect themselves from pepper spray. The Hong Kong Federation of Students (HKFS), Scholarism and Occupy Central with Peace and Love groups played an important role during the movement. The HKFS is a student organization promoting student movements and the student's engagement in Hong Kong's civil society. It was founded in 1958 by four universities' student unions. Scholarism is a secondary school student activist group defending

pro-democracy policies that was founded in 2011. Joshua Wong, one of the main founders, was a key student leader during the Umbrella Movement. Occupy Central with Peace and Love was a civil disobedience campaign established in 2013 by Benny Tai, Chu Yiu-ming and Chan Kin-man.

The triggering factor of the Umbrella Movement as an act of civil disobedience was that at the end of August in 2014, the National People's Congress Standing Committee (NPCSC) announced that universal suffrage would be implemented in Hong Kong by 2017. However, "the composition, the number of members and the method of formation of the nomination committee for 2017 remained the same as the Election Committee in 2012" (Chan, 2014, p. 576). Around 200,000 representatives of elite business and social sectors with close Beijing ties, elect 900 of the committee's members of a total 1,200-member election committee which is then responsible to choose the chief executive; currently Carrie Lam (FreedomHouse, 2019). This electoral basis favored pro-Beijing interests and has led to increasing dissatisfaction among Hongkongers (Chan, 2014). Other factors were related to economy and future expectations such as the high property prices, the increasing gap between the rich and the poor, and uncertain salary prospects (ibid.).

Young people are especially responsive to the need of a democratic reform, being conscious of their Hong Kong local identity and differences with mainland China. In 2010, the Hong Kong Chief Executive announced that Moral and National Education (M&N) should be taught as an independent subject in every primary and secondary school, to cultivate the moral character and national identity of Hong Kong students and introducing the so-called "China Model" which mainly exalted the Chinese Communist Party (Wang, 2017). The Anti-M&N Alliance was formed by Scholarism, the Parents Concern Group (PCG), the Hong Kong Federation of

Students (HKFS) and the Hong Kong Professional Teacher's Union (HKPTU). Scholarism and the HKFS were especially active organizing marches, hunger strikes and class boycotts. During the 2012 Anti-M&N, Scholarism had its debut on the streets (Wang, 2017). According to Wang, (2017, pp.128-129) the Anti-M&N provided the resources and tactical preparation for the 2014 Umbrella Movement which learnt from the 2012 collaboration between different movement organizations, leadership skills and protest tactics.

In September 2014, activists and participants occupied the public space, the square and streets, as the main form of collective action including various actions performed by individuals and groups and they also made use of cyberspace (Lee, 2015a). During the 79-day occupation, Hong Kong civilians occupied three major business areas, Central, Causeway Bay, and Mong Kok. Collective mosaic walls containing messages of support, called "Lennon Walls", were created with colorful post-it notes, addressing topics such as democracy, universal suffrage and the protesters themselves. They were located at Central Government Complex, Hardcourt Road, Admiralty and were also seen on a number of campuses during the Umbrella Movement.

In addition, students started a boycott of classes and made four demands: 1) withdrawal of the NPCSC decision in August 2014; 2) endorsing civic nomination for the election of the Chief Executive; 3) abolition of functional constituencies and, 4) a clear timetable to achieve these objectives (Chan, 2014, p. 576- 577). University Student's Unions from the eight publicly financed universities and various tertiary institutions have always had a relevant role during political movements. At the same time, the Universities Ordinance and Rules and Regulations guarantee the right of professors and students to express their demands and concerns. However, most of universities refused to handle statements or give public comments when HKU Professor Benny Tai among other activists were arrested.

Regarding the use of the networked space, activists and protestors mainly used Facebook and Telegram to communicate. Considering that in Hong Kong, compared to mainland China, there is largely Internet freedom, “the Internet offered the movement an alternative channel for public communication, it helped them evade censorship, and it was instrumental in assisting them with group formation, coordination, and mobilization” (Tsui, 2015, p. 448). Also, multiple platforms such as Facebook pages, websites or Twitter accounts were translated into English in order to reach the international community. One YouTube video created by an HKU student in which she pleaded with the world to pay attention to developments in Hong Kong reportedly received over a million views (ibid., p.449). According to Lee (2015b) “social media effectively contributed to the understanding of civil disobedience” for two main reasons: first, it provided a platform where pro-movement discourses were widely available and second, it allowed a high degree of interactivity and a place to raise public awareness of the concept of civic activism.

That being said, the attempt of Umbrella Movement activists to influence the political agenda and change the electoral system by achieving real universal suffrage failed. However, the Movement “represented a significant change in the city's socio-political development” (Tam, 2018, p. 93). Also, according to Lee (2015b, p. 407) the spread of the idea of civil disobedience as well as the fact of remaining a mostly non-violent mobilization played a key educational role in the society, influencing actions and campaigns of civil disobedience in the future. Additionally, since then activists have searched for new ways and sites to express their demands and frustrations. New pro-democracy political parties such as Demosistō were created, although many activists were arrested. Besides, the current Anti-extradition law movement

demonstrates the aim of Hongkongers and especially youth to keep defending their civil and democratic rights.

A global movement: The UK's Extinction Rebellion

The third case of student-led activism originated in the UK and is known as the Extinction Rebellion (XR). Launched in October 2018, XR is a social movement that (as of this writing) has used non-violent civil disobedience to campaign for radical and immediate government action in response to what the group describes as a “climate emergency” (Belam, n.d.). XR has organized a number of demonstrations to date, culminating in a large-scale 10-day ‘Rebellion’ in London in April 2019 in which over 1,000 activists were arrested. Protests were designed to cause non-violent social disruption, and have included blocking roads, railway lines and protesting at Heathrow airport. Originating in London, protests have expanded across the UK to include Cardiff, Leeds, Bristol and Glasgow, as well as expanding globally, with groups set up in the US, Spain, Australia, South Africa and India (Belam, n.d.). A major achievement of the group to date is the UK Parliament’s official declaration of a climate emergency, although the declaration does not legally compel the government to act (BBC News, 2019b).

Reporting on the emergence of XR has typically included the story of co-founder Roger Hallam, a PhD student specializing in civil disobedience at Kings College London (KCL) (Laville, 2019). Hallam made headlines when he and another activist spray painted “Divest from Oil and Gas; Now!” and “Out of time” on a listed 1960s building on the KCL campus in protest of the University’s investments in fossil fuel companies, reportedly causing damage worth £7,000. They represented themselves at their trial and were cleared of all charges, arguing “their actions were a proportionate response to the climate crisis” (Cockburn, 2019). Hallam explained how his academic studies were influential in his decision to deface the University. He said: “My approach and my research is how we can update the work of Gandhi and Martin Luther King

in a modern context.” Five weeks after the protest, the university reported removing £14m worth of investments in fossil fuel companies, and pledged to become carbon neutral by 2025 (ibid.).

The UK case provides evidence of a high level of institutional support of student activism on the part of King’s College London. That one can undertake a PhD in civil disobedience is noteworthy in itself, and the fact that the KCL authorities made a dramatic decision to divest from fossil fuels demonstrates a significant level of respect for student voices and activism in general. Another noteworthy example of the high level of support for Extinction Rebellion from the UK case is evident in an open letter to *The Guardian* written by 94 signatories, the majority of which are academics. They write:

When a government wilfully abrogates its responsibility to protect its citizens from harm and to secure the future for generations to come, it has failed in its most essential duty of stewardship. The “social contract” has been broken, and it is therefore not only our right, but our moral duty to bypass the government’s inaction and flagrant dereliction of duty, and to rebel to defend life itself.

We therefore declare our support for Extinction Rebellion, launching on 31 October 2018. We fully stand behind the demands for the government to tell the hard truth to its citizens. We call for a Citizens’ Assembly to work with scientists on the basis of the extant evidence and in accordance with the precautionary principle, to urgently develop a credible plan for rapid total decarbonisation of the economy (Green et al., 2018).

One of the key demands of XR is the formation of a ‘citizens assembly’ to complement existing political structures in the UK with a group of 50 to 150 randomly selected citizens who can deliberate and take action on climate change related issues without influence from lobbyists or concerns about election cycles (Extinction Rebellion, n.d.-b). This open letter above written in support of XR and the creation of a citizens assembly was soon followed by another, signed by academics, authors, politicians and activists from around the world, highlighting the way the movement had spread beyond the UK’s borders.

The UK's 'non-partisan' news source the BBC recently made a documentary of the group, describing the film as "the first to get inside the new climate movements. It reveals how they have mobilised a generation to take radical action to help save the planet from climate change" (BBC Three, 2019). Giving a spotlight to the group on national television has arguably helped to further publicize the group's key issues and their rationale for civil disobedience. However, causing civil disruption has unsurprisingly resulted in public criticism, particularly when the group staged a roadblock on a major highway, stopping traffic and preventing people from getting to work, picking up their children, and attending a nearby hospital (BBC News, 2019a).

Nevertheless, XR have mobilized participants from a relatively wide-ranging age demographic, including many young people of school age. However, not all in Britain's diverse society feel equally welcome. The movement has united with Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg, a high-school student who sparked the global 'Fridays for Future' movement which entails students strike from attending school every Friday until radical action is taken by world leaders to respond to the climate crisis (Fridaysforfuture.org, n.d.). As many as 1.4 million students from 123 countries participated in a global school strike for the climate on Friday, March 15th, 2019 (Barclay & Amaria, 2019). While the youth have taken up these movements in large numbers, criticism has been made about climate activist groups for alienating those from BAME (black, Asian and minority ethnic) backgrounds (Yusuf, 2019). XRs stated goal of their 10-day demonstration in April was to get as many people arrested as possible, and this approach reportedly puts off some black campaigners who fear police hostility and violence (ibid.).

XR demonstrations typically involve the creative repurposing of place for the achievement of the group's goals. A recent example was using the main hall of the London's Natural History

Museum to stage a “die-in”, with scores of protesters lying on the floor beneath the hanging skeleton of a blue whale to raise awareness of the mass extinction of species (Perraudin, 2019). Other tactics have involved using the demonstrators’ own bodies as tools of civil disobedience, such as protesters super-gluing themselves to doors and chaining themselves to vehicles in efforts to shut down aspects of society in the name of their cause. As was mentioned above, their choice to block a major highway leading to Bristol arguably resulted in counterproductive negative public opinion towards the group. In addition to the frustrations caused to many commuters, another criticism leveled at the group pointed to the pollution caused by the subsequent 7km traffic jam on a major highway (ibid.).

The movement describes itself as a “non-violent network” that aims to be “participatory, decentralized, and inclusive” (Extinction Rebellion, n.d.-a). The structure of the group is also one that mobilizes based on self-organizing interconnected small groups who agree to adhere to the groups core principles and values. As with the other cases, XR utilize online and offline media platforms to communicate, organize and recruit members to the movement.

Discussion and conclusion

Comparison of these somewhat disparate student-led social movements that have taken place in different locations around the world and for different reasons reveals a number of context-specific influences that have given these movements their shape. The degrees by which higher education institutions in each case support student civic engagement it notably varied, with Japan being the case where universities in general actively discourage student activism. This was compounded by the broader social stigma against youth political engagement, which entailed the extant informal networks provided by universities went largely unutilized. Furthermore the absence of student unions and other political groups highlights an atmosphere

at Japanese universities that largely dissociates student life with political participation. At the time of this writing, the Global Climate Strikes organized by Friday's for Future took place on September 20th and 27, 2019, with a reported 6 to 7.6 million attendees worldwide. A student-led group helped organize the protest in Tokyo, but rebranded it a March instead of a Strike, and held the demonstration at 5pm so no school needed to be missed. Turnout by world standards was low at a reported 2,800, highlighting the persistence of the social stigma attached to public displays of civic activism (So, Katori, & Fujiwara, 2019).

By contrast, the academics and student groups representing Hong Kong's higher education system were central to the development of the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong. This may point to a continuation of an ethos at Hong Kong universities inspired by the British tradition of liberal education and academic freedom, or it could be a product of the homegrown collective opinion of the importance that Hong Kong realize its own 'national' identity characterized by a commitment to liberal democracy in the face of an increasingly encroaching mainland. As of this writing, massive protests have once again come to dominate the urban landscape in Hong Kong, with Hongkongers pitted against the police and a Beijing-backed local government in what is proving to be an increasingly perilous situation.

The UK higher education context was perhaps the most supportive of student activism of the three cases. The curricular availability of doing a PhD in civil disobedience is noteworthy, and the major decision of King's College London to dramatically alter its investment portfolio away from fossil fuels in response to costly acts of civil disobedience on campus by one of its students is remarkable. The widespread endorsement of XR by academics across the UK also points to the broad level of support for civic engagement by the academy and the public at large.

With regard to the ‘spaces of autonomy’ framework, it is clear that a “constant blending of offline and online repertoires of participation” have facilitated novel and effective forms of civic engagement across all three cases (Theocharis, 2012, p. 162). While each case relied heavily on the Internet as a free space of networked communication, in all cases the student-led groups also relied on the local transformative use of urban spaces to make their issues known to the publics and their respective governments. In doing so, all cases adopted techniques of non-violent and creative resistance aimed at raising awareness and mobilizing the masses in a peaceful manner. As was mentioned above, the SEALDs case was the only one that apparently declined to tap into the localities of group members’ own university campuses, due to social stigmas surrounding protest. In this sense SEALDs was perhaps the group that relied most heavily on the use of the space of free networked communication found online.

Our analysis points out the dynamics between the macro-level (national and cross-border, institutional, social, and political context) and transnational level (cyberspace and global context) in all cases. When talking about student activism, the local and the global are without doubt interconnected. We find all these dynamics having a positive impact on student activism enabling for the construction of autonomous spaces for protest. What reinforces the support of social movements and student activism in all cases is the necessity to reach the international sphere in order to break national and cross-border boundaries. This pattern defines student activism in a “networked society,” where networks are the tools that challenge the relationship between power (system) and counter-power (civil society) (Castells, 2013), empowering the dynamics between place and space.

This study aimed to explore the differences and commonalities of three contemporary student-led movements that originated in different national contexts and have spread in varying degrees across borders. It attempted to give particular consideration to the structural and social roles of higher education institutions, and the broader contexts of agentive places and networked spatialities on the characteristics of student-led movements. The paper was intended to emphasize preliminary theoretical conceptualizations over empirical findings, and set the stage for further empirical research.

We recognize that this preliminary exploratory study has a number of limitations. A major limitation of comparing multiple cases in the confines of a single academic paper is that the complexities of each case cannot be fully discussed. This brief survey of three contemporary student movements thus undoubtedly overlooked important aspects of each movement selected for analysis. A further limitation was the sole reliance on secondary data sources for information. We acknowledge these faults and suggest that this paper aims merely to spark scholarly interest and conversation about the possibilities for comparative research of student activism in the contemporary age of communicative globalization. It is our intention to build on the frameworks and ideas discussed in this paper to conduct further empirical research into these cases. We suggest that the ‘spaces of autonomy’ concept from Castells can be further developed into a deductive analytical framework that would provide novel insights into the activities of student groups across contexts. We also hope to reignite the discussion of higher education institutions as critical actors in the creation (or repression) of an active democratic citizenry through the use of universities as spaces for dialogue, debate and civic engagement.

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