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Professionals in Revolt: Specialized Networks and Sectoral Mobilization in Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the roles of professional networks in mass protests. The extensive participation of professionals in the anti-extradition movement in Hong Kong, using their professional expertise, specialized networks and institutional positions, constituted a novel form of collective action. Based on framing analysis of sectoral petitions and interviews with participating professionals, this paper shows that state–corporatist arrangements and social movement abeyance structures laid the foundation for sectoral mobilization in the anti-extradition movement. It reveals the conditions under which professional activism can move beyond individual practices and overcome organizational barriers to generating resources to sustain a mass movement. Perceived threats to the professional ethos triggered cross-sectoral participation. Sectoral mobilization modes and levels were contingent on an array of institutional constraints, informal networks and conjunctural events that made for widespread and legitimate professional involvement in a networked movement.

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Introduction

The role of professionals as a knowledge community and institutional actor in social movements is under-studied. A recent study in a non-democratic setting suggests that middle-class growth in state-dependent professional sectors tends to weaken coalition-building in support of democratization (Rosenfeld, 2017). The dynamics and impacts of protest participation and the sectoral mobilization of relatively autonomous professional actors in a semi-authoritarian setting remain under-explored.

This paper examines the extensive participation of professionals in the 2019 Anti-Extradition (Anti-ELAB) movement in Hong Kong. Although middle-class professionals are no strangers to Hong Kong's social movements, past social actions are confined to a few pro-democracy sectors, mostly in individual capacities. The Anti-ELAB movement, however, saw territorial-wide and cross-sector involvement of professionals in Hong Kong. Professionals used their expertise, institutional positions and resources to provide unprecedented, high-profile support for the movement. This boosted the movement's credibility and placed the government in a weak position.

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The extensive and active participation of professionals in the Anti-ELAB movement was surprising in more ways than one. Professionals in Hong Kong were co-opted and privileged under a state-corporatist regime and were well remunerated and respected. It was assumed that professionals carried out their duties in an impartial, rational and apolitical manner. This paper will first review the literature on professionals in social movements and Hong Kong's peculiar state corporatist system in relation to professionals' roles. We study the role of professionals in the 2019 anti-extradition movement with a mixed-method approach, including how the initial petitions framed the movement to one related to the core values of Hong Kong. We showed how the state corporatist system politicized and served as a mobilization framework for professionals. Network resources grew over the years, including during the post-Umbrella abeyance period. Police violence against protesters in 2019 violated the basic ethos of professional groups, leading to extensive professional participation, yet the professional ethos posed constraints on their patterns of participation.

Professionals in social movements

Classical theories of democratization assign a key role to the rise of the middle class in pursuing democratic power-sharing (Huber et al., 1993; Huntington, 1991). However, few studies have considered the roles of professionals in democracy or social movements. Sociologists have focused on differences between social movement organizations and professional bodies (Jenkins et al., 2017). As noted by Zald (2008), social movements are generally seen as bursts of spontaneity and emotion, in stark contrast with the cool rationality assumed to mark the behaviour of professional bodies.

Professions such as social workers, lawyers and doctors have historically played roles in supporting social and political movements in various countries (Elsesser, 2013; Sarat & Scheingold, 2006). Social workers play important roles in helping the underprivileged in various movements. Lawyers have participated actively in movements by engaging in cause lawyering and community lawyering and providing legal support for people arrested for joining political movements, exemplified by the legal professional networks in democratization in Taiwan and South Korea (Andrews & Jowers, 2018; Chang, 2015; Ho, 2010; Zwerman & Steinhoff, 2012). Unionized teachers embraced 'activist professionalism', emphasizing expertise and autonomy and striving to bring together networks of educational interest groups to push for educational change at various levels (Sachs, 2000). Despite these examples of professionals' activism, theorization of the special role of professionals in social movements has been largely absent.

Modern governmentality assumes the neutrality of science, which is seen as transcending politics (Adams, 1998). The Weberian ideal type posits that a hallmark of modernity is the application of universalistic, scientific, and rational principles to different aspects of social and political institutions. Professional bodies such as those of doctors, lawyers, engineers are the embodiment of this rationality in modern society, with their authority derived from carefully crafted codes and procedures, which are supposed to be based on scientific knowledge and legal-rational principles. In western societies they are usually given special institutional autonomy and authority, with the assumption that they can self-govern by their scientific, objective and rational practices which should not be interfered with by 'politics'. Professionals are expected to carry out

their duties objectively and rationally, following clearly prescribed procedures, independent of their own political or other value orientations. The considerable respect afforded to professionals, especially in East Asian societies where education and scholarship are highly valued, gives them privileged institutional positions and access to resources that allow them to wield political and social influence during political controversies (Shin & Sin, 2012). However, as this influence depends on their professional authority and status, the ethos of impartiality, non-partisanship, objectivity and adoption of a 'scientific' approach can constrain their participation in social movements. Furthermore, professionals usually belong to a privileged class who benefit from the status quo and are well connected with state elites, reducing their incentive to support movements for change.

This paper aims to fill a research gap regarding the role of professionals in social movements. What motivated professionals to deviate from institutional politics to participate in street protests? How did professionals appeal to their peer networks and the broader populace in their unique contribution? With the case study of the 2019 Anti-ELAB movement in Hong Kong, we show how professionals can use their knowledge, institutional positions and resources to support the movement. The basic ethos of professionalism was the driving force behind their participation, yet this ethos also constrained their patterns of participation.

State corporatism under contestation

The case of Hong Kong is special, as professionals enjoy a special political status in the hybrid regime. For decades, discourses on colonial Hong Kong have been dominated by those of a non-interventionist minimalist state (Friedman & Friedman, 1981). Detailed studies of post-war colonial rule noted the careful management of state-society relations by the colonial government, partly by co-optation of business and professional elites by appointment, as key to colonial legitimacy and stability (Ma, 2009; Ngo, 1999; Scott, 1989). This strategy continued somewhat after 1997, with the non-elected Hong Kong government relying on some form of state corporatism to engineer a pro-regime coalition (Fong, 2014; Ma, 2007). Two key institutional arrangements of this corporatist regime are the functional constituency (FC) elections in the Legislative Council (LegCo) and the Election Committee (EC) that elects the Chief Executive (CE). Both systems grant special representation to business and professional elites, including professional groups such as lawyers, doctors, engineers and social workers. In 2020, representatives from professional groups were guaranteed 9 of the 70 (13%) LegCo seats and 360 of the 1,200 (30%) EC seats (Wong & Or, 2020).

Research has shown that the FC and EC constitute bargaining frameworks through which sectoral elites can lobby for benefits for their respective sectors, including government subsidies, policy favours or new governance structures (Ma, 2009, 2016). Some professional voters focus more on sectoral interests than territory-wide policies and political ideologies when casting their FC votes (Ma, 2013). This creates a two-tier clientelist structure: sectoral representatives lobby the state for policy favours and resource benefits for their sectors, whilst constituents elect representatives who will expand their protected benefits. This is meant to co-opt professionals into supporting the government and the undemocratic regime.

The Hong Kong democracy movement, which started in the 1980s, has been led primarily by the 'new middle class' or 'service professionals' (So & Kwitko, 1990, p. 384). The Hong Kong Professional Teachers Union, founded by veteran movement leader Szeto Wah in 1973, has provided vital organizational support for the movement. Over the years, professional bodies such as the Hong Kong Bar Association and Institute of Engineers have adopted non-partisan positions. In the FC elections, however, sectors representing teachers, lawyers and social workers are seen as democratic strongholds where liberal values override clientelist concerns. Recent studies showed that material incentives are becoming less attractive to young professionals in sectors such as accounting, due to the increasingly monopolistic nature of the business environment (Ma, 2020). Clientelism is losing its appeal as young professionals do not expect to receive a large share of the spoils. This has created a generational split, as young liberal-minded professionals have begun to tilt their respective professional sectors towards supporting democracy (Ma, 2020).

The 2014 Umbrella Movement was a political awakening for many young professionals. Approximately 20 new small political groups were formed by professionals after the Umbrella Movement, which served as nascent networks for mobilization (Ma, 2020). In the 2016 LegCo election, pro-democracy candidates won eight of the nine professional FC seats. In the sub-sectoral elections for the EC in December 2016, pro-democracy candidates won almost all (325) of the 360 professional seats. The institutional framework of state corporatism, in the form of FC and EC elections, helps define the boundaries of 'professional' sectors and provides frameworks for networking, political action and mobilization. Political ideology has become an increasingly important deciding factor in elections in the professional sectors.

In brief, Hong Kong's state corporatist structure has institutionalized a semi-democratic field enabling the preservation of professional ethos, autonomy and networks despite the autocratization trend (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019). On the one hand, the Umbrella Movement is a critical juncture that brought momentous changes to the ways political participation is perceived and conducted (Cheng & Chan, 2017; della Porta, 2020). It formulated new social capital, fuelled civil society networks, and motivated the participation of professionals in various sectoral and electoral platforms. On the other hand, the regime struck back to close the space for organized resistance. While pro-democracy parties and social movement organizations were targeted and disciplined, professional associations and grassroots networks largely survived (Cheng, 2020). The lived experience of movement continuity and state repression generated an array of solidarity among and threat towards pro-democracy supporters in the post-2014 period. The professional associational and informal networks institutionalized by the corporatist structure became the few preserved realms of dissenting voices and values. These abeyance networks were kept latent but reactivated during the Anti-ELAB movement.

Protest frames and sectoral mobilization

Framing is an 'active, processual phenomenon that implies agency and contention at the level of reality construction' (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 614). Protest frames occupy a central role in communicating protest movement objectives and ideologies. They articulate the issue at stake, what can be done, and how to appropriate collective actions.

Through inventing and cross-referencing lexicons and narratives, individuals or groups can show allegiances, assign blame, and mobilize like-minded individuals to take action (Gillan, 2008). The production of protest frames is crucial to mobilization, as it creates a narrative for participants to make sense of their claims and actions and a collective identity that justifies struggle. These narratives can help justify the degree and form of the repertoire to be comprehended (Cheng & Yuen, 2019). Therefore, they can hold equal importance as protest action itself (Tarrow, 2013). This socially constructed identity also signifies the boundary between adherents (us) and adversaries (them), serving as an effective means of mobilization (Gahan & Pekarek, 2013).

These protest frames are especially crucial for professionals, who are often not regular protesters on the streets. Past participation of middle-class professionals in social actions in Hong Kong was invariably related to their respective sectoral interests, and had their respective institutional channels to negotiate with the government. Others participated in individual capacity for a common cause without overt attachment to their sectors or classes. The revolt of Hong Kong professionals as a collective entity thus offers a valuable opportunity to better understand how and why these unexpected participants in collective action are motivated to join in such action. The narratives in their framing reveal the relationship between sector and activism, bridging the motivations at both organizational and individual levels and situating the collective identity and ethos of different professions.

Stereotypes and metaphors are often used to communicate social events in an accessible way for the general public, legitimatizing grievances and converting bystanders to the cause. In many contemporary protests, the absence of a centralized organization has raised two key questions: Who selects collective action frames, and how are action frames adopted collectively? By cross-referencing the sectoral petitions and public sentiments in the early stages of mobilization, we reveal the extent to which professionals' motivations were aligned with those of the public over existential threats to their liberties and ethos, thus motivating and justifying professional activism beyond defending sectoral interests.

Methods and data

To examine the role of specialized knowledge and the dynamics of sectoral mobilization, we took professional individuals and their associational and informal networks as units of analysis. Our data were collected from online petitions, in-depth interviews, and onsite surveys.

We conducted framing analysis of petitions from the professional sectors circulated online from late May to 8 June 2019, just before the two mass rallies in mid-June, where one million and two million citizens participated, respectively. The online petitions gathered 290,000 signatures, with 9% or 44 petitions coming from professional sectors. Our analysis included 21 petitions that included full statements and signatories. Our sample for the framing analysis comprised the statements and signatories of professionals belonging to the FC sectors, revealing the scale and network of sectoral mobilization. Our content analysis of the statements began with open coding to reveal how problems were diagnosed, solutions were proposed, and actions were endorsed within and across sectors (Benford & Snow, 2000), followed by axial coding of categories into themes. The content analysis examined how and why different professional sectors came to agreement and

saw the extradition bill as an existential threat to their knowledge, ethos and interests. These discursive notions not only motivated their associational networks to take to the streets but also promulgated, albeit unintentionally, each professional sector's specific roles in the protest field despite the absence of a hierarchical organization.

Second, we conducted two onsite surveys at the mass rallies on 9 June and 16 June 2019. Interviewers were distributed evenly at the protest routes and asked to invite every tenth person they saw in their designated zone to complete the survey. The total sample size reached 1,160, with an overall response rate of 86% (Yuen et al., 2021). We analysed whether the motivations of ordinary citizens to participate were aligned with the professionals' framing of the movement. The alignment between popular sentiments and professional ethos over the existential threat built consensus among participants and sympathizers (De Vydt & Ketelaars, 2021). It helped to explain the cross-sectoral mobilization among professionals, which was the condition for them to use their expertise and resources to perform specific roles in the protest field. This frame alignment also enabled some progressive professionals to overcome organizational hierarchies and institutional charters to rally their peers and form ad hoc alliances across sectors. Professional activism was thus no longer restricted to defending sectoral interests but linked with the abstract principles of professional ethos.

Finally, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 42 professionals from six sectors: (1) barristers and lawyers; (2) medical doctors; (3) other healthcare professionals in different specialties, including Chinese medicine, therapists and nurses; (4) school principals and teachers; (5) journalists; and (6) social workers. The initial batch of interviewees was identified through their FC and EC membership and as signatories to the online petitions. Some were involved in post-Umbrella Movement professional political groups. Additional interviewees were recruited through a mixture of stratified and snowball sampling, drawing on the networks revealed in online petitions and organizational affiliations. Acknowledging the central role of human agency in social movements, the interviews revealed the micro-dynamics of the movement's commitments and constraints as well as how actors mobilized at the meso level (Blee, 2013, p. 96; della Porta, 2014, pp. 231–2). Snowball sampling allowed us to include high- and low-profile participants in inherited civil society networks and expanded informal networks under a decentralized structure. The selection process helped to verify the impact of associational and informal networks on sectoral mobilization. We ultimately interviewed a significant number of professionals who occupied key institutional positions and/or played major roles in coordinating the mobilization within and between sectors. The interviewees' testimonies were hence representative of the dynamics in their sectors and the movement as a whole (Appendix 1).

Mobilizing massive rallies: ethos, petitions and frames

The Anti-ELAB movement originated with a murder case in Taiwan in 2018, when the suspect fled to Hong Kong. In February 2019, the Hong Kong government proposed amending existing laws to allow extradition of criminal suspects to territories with no extradition agreements with Hong Kong, including mainland China and Taiwan. Critics quickly noted the lack of legal protection and due process in mainland China, leading to

widespread fears that Hong Kong citizens' basic rights would not be respected. A series of online petitions from different sectors from May to early June framed the struggle and led to two million-strong rallies in mid-June 2019.

The petitions circulated online in late May galvanized society-wide opposition to the extradition bill. The petition campaign was initiated by alumni, students and teachers at various secondary schools and universities. Many of these petition statements invoked school mottos to frame the bill in moral terms, and some named and shamed senior government officials who were alumni. The campaign swiftly spread to different industries as lawyers, bankers, accountants, journalists, doctors, nurses and technology workers all crafted petitions in their own words. Parents, homemakers, immigrants, churchgoers, residential community members and hobby groups followed suit. Their intent was to relate the extradition bill issue to all walks of life and emphasize the ubiquity of its likely impact.

We found that 497 petitions opposing the extradition bill were circulated online before 9 June, receiving more than 290,000 signatures. On average, each petition was signed by approximately 560 people. Secondary and tertiary educational institutions produced approximately 65% of the petitions, and professional groups accounted for approximately 10%. Few initiators held leadership positions in social movement organizations or political parties; most were ordinary citizens relying on digital communication and their social networks to mobilize others. [Table 1](#) shows that 24,958 professionals from various sectors signed the petitions, which was more than 10% of the 229,750 registered professional FC voters in Hong Kong in 2019. The scale of sectoral mobilization was considerable.

[Table 1](#) outlines the common and specific frames that drove professionals to protest against the extradition bill. The collective action frames can be classified as diagnostic, prognostic or motivational (Snow & Benford, 1988). Diagnostic framing denotes a shared understanding of what the problem is and who is to blame. Professionals blamed the Hong Kong government for violating procedural justice and basic human rights, as it had bypassed the bill committee and refused to suspend the bill despite strong disapproval from the public and the legal profession. They considered extradition to the mainland as threatening the city's judicial independence, civil liberties and financial stability. Different professional sectors stressed how creativity, freedom of expression or professional ethics depended on the presence of a firewall between the systems of Hong Kong and mainland China. They thus interpreted the anti-extradition movement as a struggle to defend the integrity of 'one country, two systems.'

Prognostic framing articulates a proposed solution to a problem. The major demands were for legislators to oppose the bill or for the government to withdraw it and for the responsible officials to resign. Hong Kong professionals preferred institutional solutions corresponding to their diagnostic framing to restore the integrity of the Hong Kong system. Motivational framing concerns the kind of collective action to be taken. Professionals considered the fight for political autonomy to correspond to the ethos and interests of professional autonomy, and hence called for solidarity with Hong Kong citizens.

The alignment of these three core framing tasks epitomized the existential threat that protesters felt from the bill. The consensus on grievances, solutions and actions was soon harnessed and transformed by online and on-the-ground civil society networks to enable

Table 1. Framing analysis of professionals' petition.

	Signature No.	Diagnostic	Prognostic	Motivational
<i>All Sectors</i>		<i>Common Frames</i>		
Common or recurrent frames of all sectors	24,958	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Violate procedural justice • Violate basic human rights • Neglect strong disapproval from the public and legal profession • Destroy judiciary independence and civil liberties that are cornerstones of one country, two systems • Erode the city's reputation as an international financial hub 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Withdraw the bill • Seek one-off alternative • Call for officials to step down 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Call for solidarity with Hongkong citizens • Preserve the firewall to protect professional autonomy
<i>Major Sectors</i>		<i>Sector-specific Frames</i>		
(a) Education	14,546	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Worsen education quality due to the restraint of freedom of expression • Lack of legal protection for exchange tour to the mainland 	N/A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The responsibility of educator to protect the next generation
(b) Social Welfare	1,848	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of legal protection for service recipients and social workers 	N/A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • N/A
(c) Medical	1,552	N/A	N/A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Negative impact on medical professionalism
(d) Health Service	N/A	N/A	N/A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The responsibility of health service professionals to stand with Hongkongers
(e) Sports, Performing Arts, Culture and Publication	3,261	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chilling effect to creative industry where freedom of expression is crucial • Lack of legal protection for mainland and overseas collaboration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Call for legislator's action 	N/A

Remarks: These sectoral categories follow the naming of functional constituency in Hong Kong. The signature numbers refer to those with FC representations and signed from late May to 15 June 2019.

Table 2. Protesters' primary concerns regarding the extradition bill.

Date	9 June	16 June
Number	285	875
Indexes	%	%
<i>How worried are you regarding the occurrence of the following if the extradition bill is passed?</i>		
Property price drops significantly	34.3	46.6
Foreign capital leaves Hong Kong	76.2	78.0
International community imposes sanctions	75.0	75.2
Extradition of you, your family or friends	56.2	79.9
Extradition of pro-democracy activists and politicians to mainland China	90.1	95.6
Extradition of general public critical of political affairs to mainland China	90.7	95.9
<i>To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following?</i>		
Extradition bill turning Hong Kong into One Country, One System	97.6	93.4
Extradition bill destroying the rule of law in Hong Kong	96.8	96.7

Source: Authors' onsite surveys. Respondents were asked to rank their preference on a 5-point Linkert scale. Percentage refers to and combines the extremely worried and worried responses.

mass mobilization. Table 2 summarizes the motivations for joining the two mass rallies on June 6 and June 16 from our onsite surveys. For more than 90% of the participants, threats to dissent, the rule of law and civil liberties were their primary reasons for protest. Threats to Hong Kong's financial status and global connectivity were secondary

Table 3. List of rallies/protests by medical professionals in 2019.

Date	Participants /venue	Number of Participants
26/7	Medical students of Chinese University of Hong Kong	700
26/7	Rally of Medical Professionals in QE Hospital	1500
2/8	Rally of Medical Professionals (Central)	10,000
5/8	Medical students of University of Hong Kong	More than 100
12/8	Sit-in protests of medical professionals in three public hospitals	About 500
13–14/8	Sit-in protests of medical professionals in 12 hospitals	More than 1,000
14/8	Sit-in protest of medical professionals in 4 hospitals	More than 100
15/8	Sit-in protest of medical professionals in 3 hospitals	More than 100
2/9	Sit-in protest of medical professionals in 13 hospitals	No record
6/9	Rally of medical professionals (Hospital Authority headquarters)	More than 1,000
16/9	Rally of medical professionals (Prince of Wales Hospital)	500
21/9	'Human chain' by medical students of Chinese University	About 100
18/10	Protest of medics at Tuen Mun Hospital	More than 100
21/10	Sit-in protests of medical professionals in 8 hospitals	No record
26/10	Rally of Medical Professionals (Central)	More than 10,000
13/11	Sit-in protests of medical professionals in 4 hospitals	More than 100

concerns. The data show that participants were least motivated by worries over personal safety and household wealth compared with their concerns about institutional protections to their freedoms and ways of life.

The high-profile opposition of legal professionals before mass mobilization was indispensable in framing the movement as a defence of Hong Kong's cherished core values: rule of law, civil liberties and autonomy from China. The Hong Kong Bar Association (HKBA) issued a statement against the bill as early as March, asserting that the absence of extradition arrangements to China should not be seen as a 'loophole' as the government claimed but rather as a purposive design to protect Hong Kong citizens. The HKBA proposed a one-off arrangement to settle the Taiwan murder case. In early June, the more conservative Law Society called on the government to have a comprehensive review and consultation instead of pushing the bill through LegCo. On 6 June, 3,000 legal professionals joined a march in the city centre to protest against the bill, which was tabled for Second Reading in LegCo one week later. The strong criticisms from the legal sector dealt a heavy blow to the credibility of the government, reinforcing the impression that the bill would fatally damage the rule of law and spell the end of 'one country, two systems' in Hong Kong.

The most common protest frame constructed during this period was the slogan 'no extradition to China' (*fansongzhong*). This collective action frame carried the double meaning of anti-extradition and anti-death (Cheng et al., Cheng, et al., 2021a). The latter evoked an existential threat: that the bill presented a fatal blow to the survival of Hong Kong. Massive online petitions played a vital role in popularizing this slogan. Demosisto, a leading youth movement organization founded by Joshua Wong, promoted this movement framing. The Civil Human Rights Front, a veteran social movement platform, also adopted this frame in the two million-strong rallies in June. Together, civil society networks and digital activism elicited a consensus on this frame for collective action. New and veteran movement organizations initiated the metaphor, and volunteers and spontaneous participants translated it into action-oriented frames through online petitions.

After mass mobilization began in June, different sectors and groups initiated actions in a movement with no centralized leadership or structure. Various professional groups played significant roles in the movement, which was unprecedented in Hong Kong. In the next sections, we focus on two of the most highly regarded and traditionally ‘elite’ professions in Hong Kong: medical doctors and lawyers. These are the two arguably best-paid professions in the city. For decades, the best students have been aspired to enter medical and law schools. The two sectors enjoyed high professional autonomy but also institutional dependence in the corporatist structure. Their revolt reveals the inheritance of past movement resources and networks, event-triggered responses, specialized and decentralized mobilization networks, and the ways that professional ethos both spurred and constrained movement action in 2019.

Medical professionals versus the police

The high-profile and extensive participation of medical professionals in the anti-extra-dition movement raised many eyebrows. Doctors in the UK and US have joined movements to promote healthcare reforms (Carson-Stevens et al., 2013; Loomis, 2015). Medical doctors organized to heal and support activists during the 1964 Freedom Summer (Dittmer, 2009). In Asia, doctors were at the forefront of protesting human rights abuses during the Nepalese revolution, lending great support to the movement (Adams, 1998). Doctors in Thailand also actively supported the democratic movement (Harris, 2017). Doctors in Hong Kong, however, have seldom been involved in collective social actions. Together with other medical professionals (nurses, therapists, pharmacists, psychiatrists, etc.), they enjoy stable and well-paid jobs and are usually seen as individualistic and less concerned about social issues (Ma, 2020). Our interviews showed that this changed drastically in 2019 because of the violation of their basic ethos.

Inherited and abeyance networks

The incorporation of medical doctors into the movement network started with the Umbrella Movement. The Occupy Central movement had planned for a medical team to prepare for a possible extended occupation. The use of tear gas on September 28 and the threat of police and gang violence during the occupation prompted the formation of voluntary first-aid and medical teams at the three occupation sites. A signature campaign involving 650 doctors supporting the occupation, in the form of a newspaper advertisement, formed an initial network of pro-democracy doctors.¹

The post-Umbrella Movement political groups formed by medical professionals served as a form of abeyance structure in 2016–2018, when the democracy movement was in a period of de-mobilization and low efficacy.² Abeyance is a form of challenge in a non-receptive political environment (Gade, 2019; Taylor, 1989). ‘Abeyance structures’ refers to the ways in which groups of committed activists adjust to a new environment and remain connected to each other and the wider society. A movement’s vision, network and identity are kept alive through internal activities or policy advocacy permitted by the regime. The social capital and informal networks accumulated during abeyance can serve as the bases of mobilization in the next protest cycle (Jacobsson & Sorbom, 2015). The post-Umbrella Movement medical professional groups focused on sectoral policy and

resource issues in 2016–18, as they felt that political reform was impossible. They nonetheless developed networks and maintained morale: ‘The sentiment in my sector in that period is really down. . . . for me I am just waiting for another chance’.³

This movement network was strengthened by the campaign in the 2016 EC subsectoral elections. As pro-democracy professionals needed to create a 30-person candidate list for each of the medical and healthcare EC subsectors, they reached out for sympathizers in different medical specialties and sub-fields of allied health. An EC member in the medical subsector claimed, ‘Without the EC election, we would not have found representatives and contacts in so many different sub-fields, specialties and age groups’.⁴ Some elected EC members initiated the petitions in their own professional fields in May–June 2019.

Drawing on their 2014 experience, medical professionals quickly formed voluntary first-aid and medical teams in 2019. As street-level violence escalated after June, voluntary medical teams accompanied the protesting corps, providing immediate treatment for those injured by rubber bullets, tear gas and other weapons. Medical professionals helped outside of work hours, with ad hoc coordination through WhatsApp groups and Telegram channels.

Event-driven voluntarism

Several landmark events changed the perspectives of medical professionals and drove them to high-profile action. On 12 June, when the bill was scheduled for Second Reading, dozens of protesters tried to storm the LegCo building and were forcefully dispersed by riot police with tear gas, rubber bullets and batons. The conflict lasted for hours in the city centre, causing many injuries, with footage of police violence quickly spreading worldwide. Dozens of those injured were sent to public hospitals, some under close police surveillance. Police officers entered hospital wards to arrest and oversee treatment and, in some cases, requested patients’ personal information.

This marked the first turning point for the attitude of medical professionals, who saw the police action as violating their core ethos. Interviewed doctors and nurses recounted cases where medical professionals were yelled at and their personal details uploaded to the internet, resulting in abuse by netizens.⁵ Medical professionals generally saw treating the injured as paramount and regarded patient privacy as key to trust between doctors and patients: ‘This trespassed our bottom line; I don’t care what’s your political position’.⁶ After 12 June, *Médecins Inspirés*, a post-Umbrella Movement group of doctors, and six professional groups publicly condemned the police for interfering with their work and infringing on patients’ privacy.

Another turning point came on 11 August, when a first-aider was shot by a bean bag round, causing permanent blindness in her right eye. On the same day, approximately 30 arrested protesters were sent to the hospital with severe bruises and broken bones. Doctors suspected that their injuries had been caused by severe beatings by the police. This triggered lunch-time sit-in protests by nurses, doctors and other healthcare workers in hospitals in the following week to condemn police brutality. Table 2 details the rallies and sit-ins organized by medical professionals and students from July to December 2019. The rallies on 2 August and 26 October drew crowds of more than 10,000. The actions were voluntary and loosely networked, triggered by key events.

There wasn't a coordinated effort to deliver the services. Those who signed the early petitions were more likely to get involved, but many others joined spontaneously after the clashes on the street. The number of medical volunteers may have been as high as a few dozen, but there were probably more outside my circle. [Table 3](#)⁷

The frontline medical teams were exposed to threats of injury and arrest. Some police officers showed hostility towards first-aiders, seeing them as sympathetic to protesters and obstructing law enforcement. Frontline first-aiders faced verbal abuse and were not spared from police weapons such as tear gas, bullets or water cannons. During the siege of Hong Kong Polytechnic University on 17 November, dozens of medical helpers were tied up and arrested when they left the scene. In March 2020, the United Kingdom's All-Party Parliamentary Group on Hong Kong released a report detailing numerous abuses against humanitarian and medical workers (All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Hong Kong, 2020). Violence directed against medical workers was seen as a violation of international human rights standards, further alienating medical professionals.

Ethos, resources and constraints

Police violence sparked widespread mobilization of medical professionals as it violated their basic ethos: to save lives and reduce bodily harm. The loss of lives, starting with the first suicide on 15 June, heightened sympathy among medical professionals.⁸ The beatings of protesters, which many witnessed via live broadcasts, further aroused anger and sympathy: 'We saw the beatings on live TV. We as trained medical professionals knew what kind of damage they can cause to the human body, and that is not acceptable'.⁹

Possible harm caused by police action put medical professionals in a good position to intervene. Using their professional expertise and authority, they explained the harm done by tear gas, showed X-ray images of broken bones and discredited police stories of injuries being caused by falling. In August, a medical study based on 170 treatment cases showed that tear gas exposure caused lasting physical harm, such as persistent coughing, diarrhoea, vomiting and skin problems. This disproved the police's claim that tear gas does not cause long-term bodily harm.¹⁰ Their hospital positions meant they could ensure that injured protesters received proper treatment and had their rights and privacy protected. Medical professionals in various specialties volunteered to use their expertise to heal psychological or physical injuries. Some injured protesters needed hours of physiotherapy after initial treatment, provided for by voluntary physiotherapists. Psychiatrists and clinical psychologists attended to as many as 700 cases in 2019, as many suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after witnessing and experiencing violence.¹¹ Chinese herbalists gave out medicines for free to heal the respiratory problems of protesters and bystanders who had inhaled tear gas. These services were usually provided by referral through social workers, personal contacts or groups on social media.

Medical professionals' institutional position, professional knowledge and authority allowed them to assume a prominent role in the movement. Nonetheless, they remained conscious of their constraints. Arisina Ma, president of the Hong Kong Public Doctors' Association (HKPDA), frequently openly criticized police violence but chose to provide medical support in her own church in Wan Chai during the mass rallies instead of serving as a frontline medic. She feared that her arrest on the frontlines would hurt the

image of the HKPDA and the movement. One frontline medic who had served since the Umbrella Movement would carefully remind her team members to stay neutral, with no slogan chanting or talking back to the police.¹² An interviewed doctor revealed that doctors avoided discussing protests or other political matters in hospitals.¹³ Role compartmentalization was the norm, with doctors choosing to appear impartial and apolitical in the workplace to maintain their professional authority.

The doctors' professional ethos constrained their patterns of participation. Medical professionals were conscious that their authority was derived from their scientific, impartial, objective and 'professional' image and that taking a clear political stand could hurt their image and invite complaints to the Medical Council or Hospital Authority. Very few answered the calls for a general strike on 5 August, as their professional training told them that patients' interests were paramount and they should never strike at the expense of those in need. They were also worried that if all sympathetic medical workers went on strike, then hospital care for injured protesters would be insufficient.¹⁴

Defending procedural rights: lawyers

Inheritance of networks and resources

The 'volunteer lawyer team' was a movement network inherited from the Umbrella Movement. With the professed goal of civil disobedience, the Occupy Central movement was prepared for mass arrests and planned a team of lawyers for legal support. When the occupation broke out and arrests followed, a hotline was established for arrestees to call for legal support. Approximately 20–50 lawyers were involved in the legal support team, which also handled most trials involving political protests after 2014.¹⁵ They were mostly 'rights lawyers' who had experience in cases involving human rights, labour and minority rights and were connected with activist circles, coordinated on a loosely ad hoc basis.

The sheer number of arrests in 2019 made for a different story. As hundreds of protesters might be arrested on any given day or night, up to 300 lawyers were involved, many of whom were relatively inexperienced.¹⁶ In 2019, there were three major hotlines for arrestees (or their friends and relatives) to call for legal support. Each hotline was connected with a group of lawyers, and staff or volunteers arranged for lawyers to go to respective police stations. The lawyers ensured that arrestees' rights to silence and proper legal procedures were observed and could communicate with family and witness whether police violence had caused injury.¹⁷ The lawyers sometimes had to wait for many hours, which earned them much respect from movement supporters.

Compared with the Umbrella Movement, it has a much better division of labour and institutionalization this time. From somebody getting arrested, to lawyers seeing them in the police station, to follow-up, depending on if they would be charged The whole production line The process is much more complete . . . who will do this and that Which lawyer goes where . . . it is much clearer this time. With so many people arrested and so many lawyers, it is much better this time.¹⁸

Resource mobilization

Raising public funds to support the legal costs of protest-related trials was another important inherited movement resource. The Justice Defence Fund, formed in 2016, collected public donations to pay the legal costs of activists charged after the Umbrella Movement. In 2017, two million dollars were raised at a rally protesting against the sentencing of Joshua Wong and other activists. This became the Imprisoned Activists Support Fund to help jailed activists. In 2019, after the 12 June beatings, a new fund was needed to support protesters. Public donations at the 16 June rally alone raised 12 million dollars, which became the 612 Humanitarian Relief Fund. This fund is limited to three major purposes to help protesters: medical costs, legal costs (including bail money and lawyers' fees) and emergency economic assistance to those in need. From June 2019 to 31 October 2020, the fund raised 170 million Hong Kong dollars, with approximately 130 million used to help more than 18,000 people, including approximately 96 million on legal costs.¹⁹ Without this crowdfunded support, many protesters would have been unable to bear the legal costs to protect their rights in court.

Barrister and ex-legislator Margaret Ng is one of the trustees of the 612 fund. She attended to many procedural and legal details so as 'not to expose the fund to danger'. As a barrister, she was sensitive to the vulnerabilities of such funds. In contrast, the other major support fund, the Spark Alliance Fund, saw its 70 million Hong Kong dollars frozen by the police in December 2019 on suspicion of money laundering. The 612 fund administrators kept detailed donation and expenditure records and insisted that money could only be spent on its three core purposes. This invited complaints that the fund was rigid and bureaucratic but allowed it to avoid legal trouble temporarily.

Struggles over knowledge and ethos

Knowledge was central to the anti-extradition struggle. With help from legal professionals, the broad pro-protest population received a valuable education in rights, and of legal and court procedures during the months-long campaign. The Progressive Lawyers' Group (PLG), a post-Umbrella Movement group of legal professionals, was formed in 2015 with the mission of providing public legal education. During the movement, the PLG and other legal professionals (e.g. the Facebook page of Law Lay Dream followed by 19,000 people) used easy-to-understand infographics to spread legal knowledge online. They effectively taught the public their basic rights in protests and in court and how to protect themselves in the face of police action. This served as an important countervailing force against potential abuses of power and process by the police. Other groups involving legal professionals and law students made submissions to international bodies and the United Nations to report on human rights and police abuse during the movement.

Given that the professional role of lawyers is to protect citizens' rights, in theory they should not feel a conflict between professional ethics and their role as defence counsels. Nonetheless, the lawyers interviewed revealed their own stress and struggles, with many self-doubts.

We are under a lot of stress. . . . In this movement, what we see is very different from what we studied in law school. For example, the police should not do this or that, but they keep doing it. We are in kind of an existential crisis. A lot of lawyers are quite young. . . . It is like they just finish training and you throw them into fighting in the Vietnam War.²⁰

Some believed that their intervention showed the importance of robust institutions and procedures at a time when the public was losing confidence in the rule of law in Hong Kong.²¹

You feel that you are in the midst of a turbulence. In this turbulence you see some fireflies; we are like those fireflies that give a little light and warmth.²²

The lawyers faced other constraints. Most worked in commercial firms, whose major clients were business corporations, some of which were China-funded. Some firms did not want to be identified with the movement, driving some lawyers to keep a low profile. Some managed to take a ‘business approach’ to alleviate pressure, as the cases did bring in money, which was welcomed when firm business was hard hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. Some preferred to take a back seat and help with legal research in the PLG or other groups. This allowed them to contribute their professional expertise to the movement while remaining anonymous.

Parallel mobilization in other sectors

Other professionals played their own, not insignificant roles. Professional journalists reported daily frontline confrontations through live broadcasts at high risk of police violence or arrest. As most of the public witnessed protest events via live broadcasts, it was difficult for the government and pro-Beijing media to control the framing. Reporters challenged government officials and police spokespersons in press conferences on their accounts of events and sometimes staged protests during press conferences. Our records show that from June 2019 to March 2020, journalist groups issued 39 statements condemning police violence against reporters, obstruction of reporting, verbal abuse, exposure of personal information and other violations against the press.

Social workers assumed two main professional roles in the anti-extradition movement: frontline liaison and off-site counselling. A group of progressive social workers formed the Battlefield Social Workers group, which liaised on the frontline to minimize violent confrontation. Social workers such as Chan Hung-sau refused to wear protective gear on the frontline so that they could be distinguished from protesters. Similar to medical professionals, they refrained from protest actions and offensive language, faced hostility from the police and were defenceless against police weapons. Chan was charged with a count of riot for her role in the 2019 protests.

The campaign for international support at the 2019 G20 summit showed how professional expertise could be mobilized without a leader. The G20 summit convened on 28 June in Osaka included meetings between President Xi Jinping and Western leaders. A campaign was initiated to lobby for international support for Hong Kong’s movement and place advertisements in major newspapers in the G20 countries. In just two days, a group of volunteers from different professions, all coordinated via online platforms, managed to place advertisements in 19 major newspapers in approximately 10 countries in various languages, with designs tailored to the respective audiences. The group quickly

raised six million Hong Kong dollars through crowdfunding. Accountants took care of financial matters, lawyers attended to legal issues, media and business professionals contacted the respective newspapers, and designers handled the graphics, with others translating the scripts into different languages.

This experience highlighted the immense cultural and social capital that could be wielded by teams of professionals. It also exemplified the spirit of the anti-ELAB movement: ‘Brothers climbing mountains; each contributes his own effort’. In a networked movement, different professions can contribute by using their own knowledge, resources and expertise to initiate actions.

Conclusion

This paper addresses the theoretical role of professional activism in social movements. The Hong Kong 2019 Anti-ELAB movement showed that the institutional positions and knowledge as movement resources, and high respect accorded in East Asian societies, give professionals special roles in social movements. Their authority and resources are rooted in their professional status, image and authority, which drive them to intervene primarily in a professional capacity, leading to a compartmentalization of their political and professional roles.

This paper adds to the literature on professional activism by unpacking the institutional, organizational, and temporal conditions of sectoral mobilization. Firstly, it shows how the state corporatist structure in Hong Kong has framed the sectoral networks for mobilization for the professionals. Some of the networks and resources were inherited from the Umbrella Movement (Ho, 2020) and remained active and grew during the abeyance period. Second, it shows how informal and digital networks overcame the organizational hierarchy and constraints at the established professional associations to rally peer support through online petitions and mobilizations. Temporally, contingent events of police violence and breach of procedural justice in 2019 spurred extensive voluntary participation of professionals using their resources and networks to mitigate in the increasingly violent conflict zones. In early 2020, ad hoc groupings of professionals on social media morphed into new unions in different industries. The rallies of medical professionals in 2019 paved the way for the new Hospital Authority Employee Union, which staged a five-day strike by 6,000 medical workers in February 2020, calling for the closure of Hong Kong’s borders during COVID-19. This trajectory shows how knowledge communities can interact in the digital environment and field dynamics to promote effective mobilization at both the group and individual levels.

The case of Hong Kong shows that in a hybrid regime, professional communities can make use of their unique institutional status and autonomy to assist social movements. Hong Kong’s state corporatist arrangements institutionalized a semi-democratic structure that politicized professionals and frame the sectoral associational networks. The British tradition of professional and institutional autonomy does provide a form of protection for professionals in Hong Kong. The professionals managed to find movement space amidst the interface between state institutions and civil society, and provided vital movement resources, networks and organizations. Extensive participation from various professional sectors was triggered by violation of professional ethos, as the professionals saw it as a threat to the core values of procedural justice, a bedrock to the

principle of social organization, institutional governance, and way of life in Hong Kong (Cheng et al., 2021b). This provides an important supplement to existing social movement literature, which is mostly based on experiences in western democracies. Movement networks would adapt to structural conditions in different regime types and institutional contexts to find their respective movement spaces.

The institution-embedded nature of the professionals' actions, however, means that they are in a precarious position. This paper shows that the professionals were careful in choosing to intervene in a professional capacity to maintain their image and authority, posing constraints to the actions they choose. Their active participation added credibility to the movement and gave these communities a new moral and political role. They were seen as groups that would stand up to state power and use their professional knowledge and vital institutional positions to defend Hong Kong's core values. However, in the hybrid regime and state corporatist system in Hong Kong, these professional groups are dependent on state patronage and vulnerable to state action. The anti-extradition movement brought them into direct confrontation with the state. Since 2019, some professional groups in Hong Kong, such as those of teachers, social workers and medical professionals, had been under renewed heavy criticism from the pro-Beijing press and politicians. In March 2021, the electoral method for the Election Committee (EC) for the Chief Executive was revamped. The professional sectors' representatives in the EC would be selected by groups designated or nominated by the government, instead of voted by individual professionals. The largest pro-democracy union in Hong Kong, the Hong Kong Professional Teachers Union, was forced to dissolve itself under accusation of violating the National Security Law. The government intervened to have more influence on the professional accreditation and complaint mechanisms of accountants, barristers, and social workers. All these show that the anti-extradition movement has moved the professionals from a protected institutional position to a new battlefield against state encroachment on civil society. The defence of professional ethos, status, institutional position and resources has become a new battlefield in the defence of 'One Country, Two Systems' in Hong Kong.

Notes

1. Interviewee B.
2. These include six groups formed by doctors, nurses, physiotherapists, clinical psychologists, radiation therapists and Chinese medical doctors.
3. Interviewee J.
4. Interviewee C.
5. Interviewees B and E.
6. Interviewee E.
7. Interview C.
8. Interviewees C and D.
9. Interviewee B.
10. See *MingPao*, 9 September 2019. <https://cutt.ly/WjgpHAK>
11. Interviewee D.
12. Interviewee E.
13. Interviewee C.
14. Interviewees E and F.
15. Estimates by Interviewees A and G.

16. Estimates provided by Interviewees A and G.
17. Interviewee A.
18. Interviewee G.
19. Work report of the 612 fund. <https://612fund.hk/zh/latest-report>
20. Interviewee G.
21. Interviewee I.
22. Interviewee G

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Appendix 1. List of selected interviewees

Code	Profession	Participation Experience in Anti-ELAB
A	Lawyer	Planning of Occupy Central and Legal support
B	Doctor	Representative of group of public hospital doctors
C	Doctor	Frontline medical team and public hospital doctor
D	Psychologist	Voluntary counselling of those affected by movement
E	Nurse	Frontline medical team
F	Physiotherapist	Voluntary physiotherapy help
G	Lawyer	Legal support team, experienced human rights lawyer
H	Lawyer	Legal support team
I	Lawyer	Member of Progressive Lawyers Group
J	Chinese Medicine Practitioner	Medical treatment of injured