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The rise and ongoing legacy of localism as collective identity in Hong Kong: Resinicisation anxieties and punishment of political dissent in the post-colonial era

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Abstract
China’s new National Security Law, enacted in Hong Kong on 30 June 2020, has amplified widespread concerns among the city’s population regarding the implications of this law. These concerns have at root anxieties related to Hong Kong’s resinicisation, referring to anxieties over Hong Kong’s political and economic dependence on mainland China, including loyalty and patriotism towards the motherland. This paper explores these developments in relation to the ongoing legacy of localism, argued to be instilled as a colonial project to help secure the populations’ identification with Hong Kong. Seen as ‘criminals’ from the perspective of mainland Chinese authorities, many of those involved in today’s protests (many of whom include young people) see themselves as engaging in legitimate forms of civil disobedience. First explicating the context of
Hong Kong’s colonial history in order to help make sense of present-day turmoil, we turn to recent trends in arrests related to the protests, as well as evidence of rapidly declining trust in the Hong Kong Police Force, seen by some as increasingly beholden to the interests of mainland China. Implications for these trends going forward are considered, with a discussion of the need for greater attention to colonial histories and post-colonial ramifications.

Keywords
collective identity, resinicisation anxieties, punishment, political dissent, post-colonial, Hong Kong

Introduction
Up to the turn of the 21st century, Hong Kong ranked as ‘one of the world’s safest cities’ (Broadhurst, Lee and Chan, 2017: 45). Overall crime rates, which were highest during the 1980s, have steadily declined into the post-colonial period (after 1997; further details on the colonial context is below; see Broadhurst et al., 2010; Broadhurst, Lee and Chan, 2017). Dovetailing with these trends in overall crime are public opinion polls indicating a high degree of confidence in the Hong Kong Police Force (HKPF). Nevertheless, unrest and anxiety has emerged in Hong Kong, centring on what some dub the ‘resinicisation’ or (more locally) ‘mainlandisation’ of Hong Kong, referring to the ‘policy of making Hong Kong politically more dependent on Beijing, economically more reliant on the Mainland’s support, socially more patriotic towards the motherland, and legally more reliant on the interpretation of [1997’s] Basic Law by [China’s] National People’s Congress’ (Lo, 2007: 186). A prominent example is the recent implementation of The Law of the People’s Republic of China on Safeguarding National Security in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (hereafter National Security Law), enacted in Hong Kong on 30 June 2020, which has exacerbated widespread concerns regarding its implications. The law, and developments leading up to it – especially the recent social unrest involving violence subsequent to the law’s passing –, have at root anxieties related to Hong Kong’s ‘resinicisation’; anxieties undergirded in recent years by ‘localism’, referring to a felt sense of belonging and place-based-identification with Hong Kong and qualities indigenous to the city seen to be worth safeguarding. Localist identification, moreover, is emboldened by contrasting Hong Kong identity in relation to mainland China (Hargreaves, 2015; Lee et al., 2019). These anxieties are also salient given the concept of ‘One Country, Two Systems’ and the promise of a high degree of autonomy following the handover of Hong Kong from British to Chinese sovereignty on 1 July 1997. According to the Sino-British Joint Declaration and Basic Law, Hong Kong then became a Special Administrative Region of China, with the promise that basic policies will remain unchanged for 50 years under a model of ‘One Country, Two Systems’. ‘One Country’ refers to mainland China’s sovereignty and role in governing national security and foreign affairs, while the ‘Two Systems’ refer to the preservation
of Hong Kong residents’ right to an independent legal, financial and political system (Hargreaves, 2015; Lo et al., 2020; Tsang, 2004).

As Hong Kong comes to grip with increasing state-society conflicts over perceived contraventions of the ‘One Country, Two Systems’ commitment by China, there has been growing interest in tracing these tensions back to developments during the British colonial administration (Lui, 2020). This scholarly enterprise resonates with calls to understand the present and futures of previously colonised regions as inextricably linked with developments during their years in captivity (Blagg and Anthony, 2019; Boateng and Darko, 2016). This paper makes the argument that contemporary popular challenges against the local and Central governments can be understood as an ongoing product of the friction between two legacies of the British colonial administration under the larger context of China’s continued suspicions and fears over the hybrid regime: (1) post-1984 reforms that laid fertile grounds for the development of localisation and democratisation; and (2) a proven crime control and punishment apparatus developed during the 1960s and 1970s to contain the rise of radical riots and rampant crimes. The incomplete decolonisation of the first legacy (in terms of political institutions and collective identity) but successful re-colonisation of the second (in terms of continuing and expanding colonial-era crime control and punishment systems) constitutes the paradoxical dynamic of the contemporary contentions in Hong Kong, where, despite top-down attempts to regress the progress of democratisation of the city since 1997, non-institutional and institutional political participation have gained momentum (Cheng, 2016; Ma, 2009). The shift to radical forms of political engagement (i.e. in protest repertoires as well as political identities and ideologies), on one hand, and the increasingly repressive policing and punishment regime that put political dissent in its cross-hairs, on the other, foregrounds the accelerated friction between the two legacies at the hands of China’s interventions to establish absolute control over future socio-cultural, political, economic and legal developments.

This paper presents the above argument by explicating the evolution and impact of collective identity related to ‘localism’, instilled as a colonial project, in Hong Kong, with specific attention to its criminal justice impacts, including public perceptions of police and arrest trends of those involved (significant proportions being young people) in recent protest events. The colonial citizenship project referred to here instilled a set of dispositions that value democratic ideals and embraces, for residents, Hong Kong as ‘their’ place of belonging (i.e. local identification). This project was by no means an imprint that was planned painstakingly and meticulously by the colonisers. Rather, scholars have noted that, for the majority of the time ruling over the island since 1841, the British colonial administration actively avoided empowering the local population to reach higher levels of political awareness and identity consciousness (e.g. Chan, 1997; Tsang, 2004). Still, the post-1984 reform phase is recognised as the determining period for the institutional and socio-cultural development of localisation and democratisation as various opportunities for political participation became accessible to the local populace, for example, participating in the 1991 and 1995 Legislative Council elections and mobilising in support and remembrance of pro-democracy student activists in China who lost their lives during the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown (Chan, 1996, 1997).
Documentary analysis of periodicals, official statistics, policy papers and pertinent readings support the present undertaking. When conceptualising and tracing colonial legacies and post-colonial ramifications, it is imperative to avoid privileging one perspective or empirical approach over another (Blagg and Anthony, 2019). The present study is the product of three researchers with different disciplinary trainings, social-cultural relations, historical memories and identities embedded in Hong Kong. Deliberately discussing and interrogating each other’s subjectivities and commentaries on pertinent readings of colonialism and post-colonialism, we worked together to take seriously indigenous, transnational, and cross-disciplinary understandings of the dynamics in Hong Kong. Keeping a reflexive, collaborative ethic and ‘ethical imagination’ to researching Hong Kong’s colonial past and its post-colonial impacts enabled the research process to not be exclusively shaped by the knowledge, dispositions and cultural competence of any one sole researcher (Adorjan, 2016; see also Corlett and Mavin, 2018 for more on collective reflexive practice).

In what follows, we first address the context of Hong Kong’s colonial history in order to help make sense of present-day turmoil, including the rise of localism related to colonial-era governmental projects geared to instilling a sense of citizenship and identification with Hong Kong, while buttressing the colonial government’s legitimacy. Embroiled in these developments were governmental responses, especially during the 1970s, to China’s Cultural Revolution and disaffected young people caught up in protests during the 1960s. After discussing these developments during the colonial period, we examine recent trends in localism and mass protests in Hong Kong, with specific reference to the role that localism – and its successive evolutions over time – has continued to play, as well as arrest trends especially involving young protesters. We also refer to evidence of increasing distrust of the HKPF, in particular regarding their role in the policing of protest events. Inheriting crime control and punishment regimes from the colonial era is not uncommon among former British colonies (e.g. see Boateng and Darko, 2016 on how contemporary policing in Ghana takes after its colonial-era paramilitary practice of policing), and the case for Hong Kong is no different (Chan and Ho, 2017). The legacies of the colonial period, we show, greatly influence the unrest currently gripping post-colonial Hong Kong. Implications for these trends going forward are considered, with a discussion of the need for greater criminological attention to colonial histories and post-colonial ramifications.

Colonial Hong Kong and the governmental construction of localism

Hong Kong was a Crown Colony of Britain from the mid-19th century until 30 June 1997. The 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration formally set into motion the plan to return Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty in 1997 (Endacott, 1964; Tsang, 2004). Colonial rule in Hong Kong took on the form of ‘benevolent paternalism’, comparable to systems of parens patriae where the state took the role of a caring parent, and was not ‘solely an agent of punishment, but benevolent’, helping to ‘save’ those in conflict
with the law, especially youth ‘delinquents’, from their vices (Trépanier, 1991: 205; Tsang, 2004: 204). A wider governing mentality that became influentially imported into Hong Kong after the Second World War was Britain’s system of liberal elitism (Ryan, 1999). This involved, in England and Wales, leadership by a ‘small number of male metropolitan elite(s) which reflected a broad cross-party consensus on penal matters structured around notions of social support and welfare’. Under this system, ‘the public was intentionally excluded’ from the processes of arriving at political consensus on issues which included crime control responses (Ryan, 1999: 1). Governance here was strictly undemocratic and elitist, but was seen to ‘preserve “civilized values”’ among a population often anxious about crime (Loader, 2006: 563). Despite its elitist structure, the system in England and Wales was produced under a context of democracy, with politicians being democratically accountable to their people via the Parliament (Ryan, 1999). Unlike England, of course, colonial-era Hong Kong was decidedly illiberal (i.e. democratic processes were largely curtailed under a system of ‘functional constituencies’; see Loh and Civic Exchange, 2006). While comparable in many respects, Adorjan and Chui (2013, 2014) argue that a penal elitist system emerged, whereby ‘penal policies were directed by a small circle of male colonial (i.e. English-speaking, British Caucasian) elites concerned primarily with securing and maintaining their legitimacy vis-à-vis the promotion of citizenship and citizen identification with Hong Kong’ (Adorjan and Chui, 2013: 3, original emphasis). Crime control responses were thus not beholden to public opinion and were squarely hegemonic, geared to instilling the colonial government’s political legitimacy and creating a façade of benevolent governance (Johnstone, 2000).

The colonial project of engendering Hong Kong subjectivity ramped up in the 1960s, during a time when the Cultural Revolution occurring in mainland China, and ramifications at home, behooved the colonial government to place greater emphasis on people’s identification with Hong Kong. Before the protests and rioting that occurred in 2019, the last major riots in Hong Kong transpired in the late 1960s. These riots were largely fuelled by social unrest amongst a population that felt ‘impermanence’ while living in Hong Kong and a sense of not ‘belonging’ (Cheung, 2009: 11–12; Scott, 1989). Indeed, precisely half of Hong Kong’s population in 1966 (3.3 million) consisted of young people under 21 years of age (Jones and Vagg, 2007: 376), and concerns centred on young people taking part in these riots, especially the ones that occurred in 1967, which were influenced by ‘leftist’ communist supporters in Hong Kong who were sympathetic to the Cultural Revolution occurring across the border in mainland China (Cheung, 2009; Cooper, 1970; see also Adorjan and Chui, 2014 for details regarding efforts to ‘rehabilitate’ leftist young people involved in the riots).

The colonial government expressed concerns regarding local young people’s lack of identification with Hong Kong, recognising that their own legitimacy was tied to the stability of the colony over the long term (Adorjan and Chui, 2013). The 1970s are largely seen as a time when, in response to the unrest of the late 1960s, Governor Murray MacLehose undertook a series of initiatives to enhance social investments, including crime control policies, that helped engender confidence in the state and its arms of police and corrections (Adorjan and Chui, 2013; Jones and Vagg, 2007; see also Gray,
1997 for details on the system of ‘disciplinary welfare’ which emerged in response to youth crime during this period). Declassified documents reveal, however, that such initiatives were deeply motivated by pressure Hong Kong’s government was receiving from London, looking anxiously forward to the 1997 handover of sovereignty (Yep and Lui, 2010). Regardless of the wider political motivations, in the end ‘the disturbances [during the late 1960s] led to a resuscitation of the young generation for the future and the identity of Hong Kong’ (Ma, 2009: 47).

In many respects the governmental projects of the colonial period helped produce a sense of localism in Hong Kong: a distinct identity among Hong Kong people, with a distinct socio-political and legal system in relation to mainland China. This emphasis on the unique system and culture of Hong Kong, however, was perceived to be under threat during the ‘crisis of legitimacy’ leading up to the 1997 handover, especially following Beijing’s crackdown on pro-democracy student activists in Tiananmen Square on 4 June 1989 (Scott, 1989; Tsang, 2004; see also Cooper, 2017 for links between the June 4 incident and more recent social movements). Thus the preservation of legal and social autonomy, particularly since the 1980s, became an increasing concern; one that was fostered under a colonial rule which shaped a unique identity and sense of belonging welcomed by the Hong Kong people (Ma, 2015). Interestingly, the first few years of the post-handover period were not characterised by full-blown ideological competition or firm-handed interventions from Beijing to control ‘uncooperative’ masses.1 Rather, aspirations to participate or actual participation by Hong Kong people in (increasingly radical) political dissent (Wong et al., 2019), as well as the counter-mobilisation strategies employed by the local and the Central Government with the use of colonial-era instruments of crime control and punishment, can be conceptualised as generally passing through three phases of development in the post-handover era. In what follows we outline these three phases, paying particular attention to developments in localism and Hong Kong identification, before turning to changing arrest trends among (especially young) protesters, as well as increasing distrust towards the HKPF.

The post-colonial development of localism in Hong Kong

The three phases – Phase I (1997–2010), Phase II (2011–2018) and Phase III (from 2019) – capture distinct movements of sentiments and subjectivities from below as it relates to the emerging frictions and struggles of citizenship in post-colonial Hong Kong. Though warranting further study, this conceptualisation reveals how the remnants of an incomplete decolonisation of the colonial localism project since the handover influenced the character of post-colonial strands of localism and the present-day dynamics of conflict between the anti-establishment, on one side, and the local and Central governments, on the other.

Phase I (1997–2010)

The first phase is marked by a gradual emergence of civic activism and a ‘movement’ society in the midst of growing socio-economic Hong Kong-China ties. While the
need to attend to existential security borne of the Asian financial crisis of 1997–1998, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome epidemic of 2003 and the 2008 global financial collapse temporarily tempered anxieties over the ‘China factor’ (Lui, 2020; Ma, 2015: 43), increasing antagonism towards the post-colonial government (especially its widely unpopular Chief Executives, seen by many as puppets of Beijing; see Kwong, 2016a) resulted in emboldened protests yielding effective results. During this phase the most prominent protests occurred on 1 July 2003, involving half a million protesters opposed to implementing Article 23 of the Basic Law.\(^2\) Apart from successfully influencing the government to postpone the legislation, the watershed protest also ‘kick-started a protest cycle and led to the formation of new political groups as well as “the growth of alternative media” and “an increase in citizens’ collective efficacy’ (Lee et al., 2019: 4).

During this phase, a new social movement society began to blossom, often centred on preserving key landmarks and Hong Kong’s heritage (Chen and Szeto, 2015). Crafting a civic activism premised on community resistance inspired activists and sympathisers to think more about their sense of belonging, place-based-identification and the indigenous qualities of Hong Kong they deemed worth safeguarding. As previously mentioned, up until the transitional period of the 1980s to 1997, the colonial government found no reason to embark on a project of instilling a sense of belonging or a ‘local’ identity among the city’s Chinese residents. To ensure that the status quo enjoyed by the colonisers remained undisrupted by the locals, before the 1980s, the colonial government ‘deliberately discouraged political activism, national consciousness, and the emergence of a political culture of participation, representation, and accountability’ (Chan, 1996: 19). For this reason, similar to post-colonial experiences elsewhere (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2004), the years from 1997 to 2010 capture a unique stage of social identity (re-)formation and (re-)configuring social relations. In the case of the nascent localism movement, it resulted in the growth of mobilisation structures and a culture of bottom-up, coalitional activism that existed outside traditional, institutionalised party-centric community organising (Chen and Szeto, 2015).

**Phase II (2011–2018)**

The unlikely coexistence of a deepening integration between mainland China and Hong Kong, on one hand, and the emergence of a new social movement society, on the other, provides an invaluable springboard to understanding the second phase of developments. There was a resurgence of ‘anti-China’ and resinicisation anxieties felt by many in Hong Kong, culminating in a series of increasingly adversarial events. This was caused by the emergence of right-wing ‘anti-China’ localism, that is, rising concerns that the rights, freedoms and interests of Hong Kong people are being neglected and/or threatened by the mainland Chinese government (Hargreaves, 2015; Lui, 2020).

Deepening economic integrations and cross-border mobility between mainland China and Hong Kong helped the city get back on its feet and economically recover from the onslaught of regional and worldwide crises experienced from 1997 to 2010. However, China’s increasing involvement in the territory also indirectly sowed seeds of frustration and scepticism (Ip, 2015). First, some began to perceive that the increasing inflow of
Chinese tourists and their capital had undesirable consequences on housing prices, availability of basic material necessities and access to essential healthcare services (Kwong, 2016a; Ma, 2015). From 2011 to 2012, the very same localism ideology that encouraged civic activism and self-reflection as a ‘Hongkonger’ was adopted in a novel campaign that expressively separated as distinct groups Hong Kong and its residents, on one hand, from mainland China and its residents, on the other hand, differentiated by (ethnic) identity, dispositions and sense of belonging (Ip, 2015). The more prominent concerns centred on the perceived influx of mainland Chinese into Hong Kong, depriving the city of its economic resources and placing increasing demands upon its vendors to cater to mainland Chinese tourists’ consumption preferences. One particularly contentious frame depicted Chinese tourists as literally locusts who swarm to the city to consume resources en masse (Chen and Szeto, 2015; see Kwong, 2016b for additional examples). The belief that Hong Kong was left to fend for itself from the negative spillover effects of increasing cross-border travellers and the intervening hand of the Chinese Communist Party to ‘mainlandise’ Hong Kong made for a powerful force that transformed, and ultimately politicised, localism. As Kwong (2016a: 65) succinctly states, ‘people are worried that existing mainland-Hong Kong integration actually provides more opportunity for Beijing to exercise political control over Hong Kong, resulting in the loss of local identity’. Ma (2015: 57, original emphasis) adds that ‘the new generation of anti-China sentiments … saw the [Chinese Communist Party] regime and the average mainland as major causes of Hong Kong’s problems. To them, CCP’s political control was the chief reason for the absence of democracy and autonomy in Hong Kong’.

Beijing’s white paper on The Practice of the ‘One Country, Two Systems’ Policy in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region in June 20143 and an institutional framework for Chief Executive elections unveiled on August 2014 by the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress4 did not help alleviate these anxieties. On the contrary, the implications of both advancements – announced only months apart – gave the masses a ‘wake-up call’ that Hong Kong’s road to universal suffrage and autonomy was far from being a realistic prospect (Cheng and Chan, 2017; Kaeding, 2017; Ortmann, 2016). This provoked an unprecedented chain of events that cemented localism in Hong Kong’s political discourse. First, soon after the announcements, the aggrieved masses participated and/or supported the 2014 Umbrella Movement (UM). The social movement called for genuine universal suffrage and greater autonomy as promised by the Basic Law. Enduring for 79 days across three major districts in the city, the UM represented the boldest challenge yet against the local and Central governments (Hargreaves, 2015). Second, although the demands of the UM were ultimately not realised, the resulting disappointment and anger served as propulsion for the localism movement moving forward (Kaeding, 2017). Localism helped to frame the UM, with up to 81% of protesters identifying as ‘pure Hongkongers, much higher than the 42 per cent of the general population and the 60 per cent of 18- to 29-year-olds as of December 2014’ (Cheng, 2016: 402). Surveys also indicated that as many as 52% of protesters visiting protest sites during the UM were motivated by their dissatisfaction with alleged police violence, interpreted as unlawful use of force (Cheng and Chan, 2017: 7). Cheng and Chan (2017: 8) argue that perceived unlawful violence by the HKPF during the UM in itself attracted many more
protesters ‘who were not necessarily motivated by pre-protest factors’, but did share ‘a sense of injustice, anger or efficacy’.

More confrontational resistance strategies emerged in response to perceived inadequacies from the longstanding pro-democracy political bloc, which insisted that protest be bound by the principle of non-violence and the view that Hong Kong’s fate is dependent on China’s democratisation (Kwong, 2016a; 2016b). To some of the protesters, the relatively peaceful demonstrations held during the UM were insufficient given emboldened efforts by Beijing to dismantle their promises of ‘Two Systems’, taking Hong Kong into a third, more violent phase of activism.

Phase III (from 2019)

For many in Hong Kong, it was becoming progressively clear that Beijing would not relent in their surveillance, interference and control over Hong Kong’s affairs (Hargreaves, 2017). The rise of pro-independence political discourse and the increasingly confrontational protest dynamics of the ‘localist apologists’, in particular, irked the Central Government and provoked interventions to circumvent the ‘anti-China’ radical forces from influencing Hong Kong-China relations (Hui, 2020; Lee et al., 2019; Vukovich, 2020). On 12 February 2019, the Hong Kong government proposed amendments to the Fugitive Offenders and Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters Legislation (Amendment) Bill 2019. Lee et al. (2019: 2) elaborate on why this decision generated controversy:

The amendment would have allowed Hong Kong to surrender fugitives to jurisdictions with which the city does not have existing bilateral extradition agreements, as well as to Mainland China, Taiwan and Macau. On the surface, the proposal was triggered by a murder case in Taipei in 2018. But as the amendment covered mainland China, there were strong public concerns and suspicions about the government’s motivations.

The mass dissatisfaction and anxiety levelled against the government’s decision sparked a mix of peaceful demonstrations and confrontational protests (often referred to as the anti-extradition bill movement (AEBM)), resulting in the greatest amount of violence witnessed in Hong Kong since the riots of the 1960s.

The AEBM emerged in June 2019 in response to the bill. While street protests and related crowd events decreased precipitously due to the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, online and other forms of offline activism persisted. The movement voiced discontent over, among other things, the intrusion of the criminal justice arm of China to Hong Kong, thought to further erode the ‘Two Systems’ promise (Lee et al., 2019). It pressured the Hong Kong Government to take actions largely centred on justice for the protesters and implementation of universal suffrage. It further called for a review into allegations of unlawful use of force by the HKPF (we turn to the issue of policing below). The law triggered anxieties of existential insecurity, including the fear that China could use the law to legitimately arrest, detain and sentence Hong Kong activists.
in China – or Chinese dissidents who have migrated to Hong Kong between the 1980s and 1990s – according to Chinese law (Purbrick, 2019). It is important to highlight recent patterns of arrest and their implications for the younger generation (sometimes dubbed ‘post-80s’ youth). Examining trends related to juvenile arrests (in official statistics, those aged 10–15 years) and young persons (16–20) revealed evidence for, despite overall declining trends beginning a decade before the 1997 handover, recent spikes in arrests, indicating a potential net widening effect of the criminal justice system related to young people’s participation in protest actions. Figure 2 shows the arrest
rates of juveniles and young persons from 1989 to 2020 in Hong Kong. For juveniles, the total number of offenders arrested decreased gradually. For young persons, the total number of offenders arrested varied from 6533 to 8733 during the period of 1989–1993 and reached a high point of 9175 in 1994. From 1995 to 2018, the arrest rate of young persons decreased gradually. However, the rate spiked in 2019 and continued to increase through 2020. While the number of juveniles arrested increased by 212 between 2018 (\(N=928\)) and 2019 (\(N=1140\)), the number of arrested young persons increased nearly two-fold during the same period (from 1841 in 2018 to 3128 in 2019).

Reflecting on these rates in the larger context of the city’s social order, a report published by the HKPF attributes the spike in arrests to the violent and non-violent crimes resulting from the AEBM (The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Press Releases, March 2, 2020). According to the HKPF, increases in the following crimes were evident during the months of social unrest since the second half of 2019:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{… offences against public order (+36 folds), arson (+2.2 folds), criminal damage (+54.1%), } \\
\text{possession of unlawful instrument (+10.6 folds), possession of offensive weapons (+91.5%), assault on police (+2.6 folds) and resisting arrest (+63.1%) … vandalism of more than 1000 venues, some of which were repeatedly damaged … [And] cases in which innocent members of the public were attacked by rioters due to different political views. (The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Press Releases, March 2, 2020)}
\end{align*}
\]
Speaking specifically on youth crime and arrests of persons aged 10–20 years during the AEBM, the same report communicated:

Youth crime involving offenders aged from 10 to 20 registered an increase of 1499 arrests (+54.1%) from 2769 to 4268 arrests in 2019, mainly attributable to the increase in the number arrested for offences against public order (+21.5 folds) and criminal damage (+88.1%) in connection with the ‘anti-extradition amendment bill’ related protests. (The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Press Releases, March 2, 2020)

Towards the end of the report, the HKPF listed three key takeaways regarding the AEBM: (1) an increase in proportion of arrested students and youngsters, a sizeable portion of which were students (40.9% or 3091 people out of 7549); (2) increasing engagement in and/or support of civil disobedience among the Hong Kong populace; and (3) signs of domestic terrorism (The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Press Releases, March 2, 2020, our emphasis). That sizeable proportions of young people could have not only a criminal record based on their participation in protest events, but also be branded a ‘terrorists’ through official sanctioning indicates the increasing risk of permanent stigmatisation facing politically active young people in Hong Kong. Moreover, and perhaps more significantly, they face the
risk being alienated in a society where many young people feel they have little future and collective efficacy (Forrest and Xian, 2018); a point we underscore in the discussion below.

**Policing of protests and public perceptions of The Hong Kong Police Force**

While the democratic reforms of the British colonial government have been gradually undone or contained by the local and Central governments since the 1997 sovereign retrocession, the Hong Kong Government left unchanged the disciplinary welfare apparatus, crime control policies and crowd-policing practices inherited from when the executive-led, undemocratic colony quashed and disciplined rioters, criminals and troublemakers during the 1960s and 1970s. This selective decolonisation is not uncommon. As Cole (1999: 98) astutely states,

> although many post-colonial countries have … experimented with different types of governments, most of them have preserved in their new political structures several features of the colonial state, some practically in their original forms. This is particularly true of policing.

Selectively decolonising colonial structures to protect the status quo (i.e. China’s control over one of its Special Administrative Regions) and failing to acknowledge the importance of ‘de-centring’ the post-colonial citizen-subjects early on inevitably pit the policing apparatus against political activists. From 2004 to 2014, the number of officially recorded protest events increased from 1974 to 6818, alongside a tenfold increase in the number of prosecutions for unlawful assembly or assault of a police officer (Cheng, 2016: 389–390). During the violent clashes of the AEBM in mid-to-late 2019, and fuelled by smartphone synoptic surveillance of police actions (including ‘viral’ videos depicting protesters being dispersed by police among other incidents), increased negative attention was drawn to the HKPF, accusing them of engaging in repeated actions of unlawful use of force (Amnesty International, 2019; Li and Tong, 2020). Summarising some of the most frequently cited alleged abuses of police power, Hui (2020: 294) states:

> Since August 11, 2019, police officers have routinely beaten the arrested with batons, pinned them down and rubbed their faces against the ground, pepper-sprayed their wounds, and broken their bones. Officers even fired live ammunition with near-fatalities on October 1 and November 11.

AEBM protesters felt that the HKPF, as an arm of the Hong Kong Government, was increasingly beholden to Beijing’s wishes (Li and Tong, 2020). A survey conducted by Lee et al. (2019: 16) of AEBM protesters found ‘dissatisfaction with the police’s handling of the protesters’ to be a key reason why many joined the protests; a motivation which
even came to overshadow ‘calling for withdrawal of the extradition bill’ as ‘very important’ (Lee et al., 2019). They thus state:

While the demand for withdrawal of the bill is a static concern, the dissatisfaction toward the police is a persistent dynamic between the police force and the citizens. Every time when there appeared to be abuses of power on the part of the police, the momentum of the movement could be maintained or further energized. (Lee et al., 2019: 16)

With increased police surveillance of protests, moreover, it is conceivable that ‘open avocation or perhaps even mere discussion of localism is itself automatically “unconstitutional”’, and it would also ‘allow political considerations to inappropriately enter into policing decisions and have chilling effects on political speech online’ (Hargreaves, 2019: 699; see also Hargreaves, 2017). Hargreaves (2019) adds that despite only a small number of people in Hong Kong identifying with the localist position, an aggressive campaign targeting freedom of speech may ironically serve to reinforce perceptions regarding the erosion of the ‘One Country, Two Systems’ model.

Turning to public opinion polls regarding the HKPF, the surveys often indicated, in the first two decades of the post-colonial period, a high degree of public confidence with police (see Adorjan and Lee, 2017; Lau, 2004). The HKPF was often rated high on professionalism, caring, efficiency, a modernised image and the absence of corruption (Lau, 2004: 9). Government-issued crime victim surveys in the first decade of the post-colonial period have often mirrored these findings, with respondents who report crime victimisation to police indicating an average 90% satisfaction in police performance (van Dijk, van Kesteren and Smit, 2007: 13; Census and Statistics Department, 1999: 19). The 2006 United Nations International Crime Victims Survey (UNICVS), which included Hong Kong for the first time, indicated the city (alongside Finland, USA, Canada and New Zealand), ranked highest in terms of police performance overall (van Dijk et al., 2007). That survey also found that ‘the vast majority of [Hong Kong] respondents (95.3%) considered that the police in their area were doing a very good job (14.2%) or a fairly good job (81.1%) at controlling crime’ (Broadhurst et al., 2010: 37). Furthermore, ‘the majority of HK respondents (93.5%) either fully agreed (12.2%) or tended to agree (81.3%) … that the police do everything they can to help [people and be of service]’ (Broadhurst et al., 2010: 37). Furthermore, the UNICVS, reporting on its 2006 survey of global patterns of crime victimisation and police performance, boldly stated ‘of all the cities surveyed in the UNICVS, [Hong Kong] residents were the most positive about police performance’ (Broadhurst et al., 2010: xxi). Similarly, a series of police-issued satisfaction surveys conducted from 2000 to 2018 solicited responses from the public regarding their satisfaction with six indicators of police performance, including ‘dialing 999 hotline’, ‘going to the report room’, ‘contacting police officers at the scene’, ‘phoning police station’, ‘visiting the criminal investigation office’ and ‘overall performance’. The survey results revealed increasing public satisfaction with the performance indicators of the HKPF during the seven rounds of surveys (Hong Kong Police Force, 2021).
While a useful indicator of safety and security, however, the UNICVS and police surveys mask deeper societal anxieties and unrest where present; anxieties which have been amplified in the 2010s, and arguably most strikingly during the AEBM in mid-to-late 2019. Recent qualitative research examining Hong Kong people’s perceptions of policing reveals, for instance, general confidence and satisfaction related to the HKPF’s ability to respond to crime, but also anxieties by some that the HKPF are distrusted when it comes to the policing of protest or ‘public order’ events, with some expressing, ‘when you look at [their way of dealing with] protests and politics … the police have become the private guards of the government’ (Adorjan and Lee, 2017: 521; cf. Tankebe, 2008: 78). Further evidence for this comes from data collected by the Centre for Communication and Public Opinion Survey (CCPOS) at The Chinese University of Hong Kong (2020a) (see Table 1). Comparing the HKPF’s performance in the AEBM context (i.e. ‘Performance while handling fierce conflicts during the anti-extradition bill movement’) with their performance in the non-AEBM context (i.e. ‘Performance while conducting daily functions unrelated to public events’), there was a far greater divide between the ‘satisfied’ and ‘dissatisfied’ in the former context (13.6% ‘satisfied’ and 70.6% ‘dissatisfied’) than the latter context (23.2% ‘satisfied’ and 45.7% ‘dissatisfied’). Additionally, there was a greater proportion of respondents occupying the middle-ground (i.e. ‘so-so’) when queried about HKPF’s performance in the non-AEBM context (28.9%) than in the AEBM context (14.8%). This suggests that respondents were more likely to lean one way or another on the level of (dis)

| Performance while conducting daily functions unrelated to public events | Very satisfied | Somewhat satisfied | So-so | Somewhat dissatisfied | Very dissatisfied | Don’t know/ refuse to answer |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|-------------------|-------|-----------------------|------------------|-----------------------------|
| Performance while handling fierce conflicts during the anti-extradition bill movement | 8.9%           | 14.3%             | 28.9% | 12.7%                 | 33.0%            | 2.2%                        |
| Overall performance during the anti-extradition bill movement          | 6.8%           | 6.9%              | 13.0% | 13.0%                 | 59.6%            | 0.7%                        |

HKPF: Hong Kong Police Force; AEBM: anti-extradition bill movement.
Note: The surveyed sample consists of 2008 respondents.
Source: Centre for Communication and Public Opinion Survey, The Chinese University of Hong Kong (2020a).
satisfaction when it came to the AEBM context than in contexts detached from the public events.

Also, summarising CCPOS data from 2014 to 2020, Figure 3 indicates a ‘reversed fork’ pattern with rapidly rising distrust commencing in May 2019, during the AEBM protests and a mirrored pattern of declines in trust. Notable here too is that those indicating ‘so-so’ declined after May 2019, suggestive of greater polarisation going forward.

Additional polling from the CCPOS found 70% of those polled agreeing that the police had used excessive violence during the AEBM, but also 40% agreeing that the protesters themselves had used excessive violence (Lee et al., 2019: 25). Lee et al. conclude:

Direct repression did not succeed in dispersing the crowds but instead weakened the public’s trust toward public institutions. According to the CCPOS surveys, public trust in the police declined substantially from 5.60 on a 0-to-10 scale in early June to merely 2.89 in September. (Lee et al., 2019: 26)

It is clear from the surveys cited above that, for a significant number in Hong Kong, the HKPF experienced a remarkable reversal from their previously established track record, entering the 2010s, as an exemplar of professionalism and public trust. The degree to which the HKPF are ‘loyal’ to Beijing is of course contested, even questions of whether they have engaged in unlawful use of force during protests in the AEBM. Our contention here is that the rise of localism and the social movements associated

![Figure 3. Public trust in the HKPF (2014–2020).](image)

Note: ‘Distrust’ is calculated here as the summed percentage of respondents that rated 0–4, while ‘Trust’ is calculated as the summed percentage of respondents that rated 6–10.

Source: Centre for Communication and Public Opinion Survey, The Chinese University of Hong Kong (2020b).
with it is perhaps the single largest factor impacting the socio-political climate of Hong Kong, including perceptions of police and greater criminal justice involvement of (especially young) protesters. Furthermore, it is likely to continue to play a significant role in the years ahead. In what follows we reflect further upon the colonial context from which present-day localism finds its genesis, as well as wider socio-economic factors influencing the perceptions and actions of protesters.

**Discussion**

Social philosopher George Herbert Mead offered a sociological theory of temporality that helps us theorise processes associated with collective memory (see Maines, 2001). As Maines (2001: 32) summarises, ‘by focusing on the dialectics of continuity and discontinuity, Mead gives us a framework that at once can contribute to the analysis of enduring elements of culture while identifying processes through which cultural meanings change’. Considering how an ‘implied objective past’ comes to perpetually inform a ‘specious present’, Mead’s analysis centres on ‘enduring elements of culture’ while simultaneously ‘identifying processes through which cultural meanings change’ (Maines, 2001: 32). These ‘enduring elements’, here, are the legacies of colonial empires that shape the collective imaginations of group identity and belonging in post-colonial societies. What the ‘implied objective past’ means, however, is contested, even controversial, obfuscating any clear path forward.

Hong Kong’s post-colonial period, especially the last half of the 2010s, is aptly characterised as one of ‘enduring instability without democratisation’ (Cheng, 2016: 386). However, to fully appreciate the drive against ‘Chinese illiberalism’ occurring today in Hong Kong, it is necessary to situate post-colonial discord within the wider context of the city’s colonial past, including the quashing of ‘leftist’ elements in the 1960s, especially among young people, and the construction of localism situated *a priori* in antagonism with the perceived ‘illiberalism’ of China (Vukovich, 2019). Vukovich (2020: 15) argues that ‘it is not so much that China has re-colonized its stolen territory but that Hong Kong has never gone through a moment of decolonization’. This points to the inextricable impact of the colonial period on present-day localism, including its vie for universal suffrage but also ‘anti-China’ sentiments directed not only at Beijing but mainland citizens and their perceived socio-economic encroachments upon Hong Kong (Ma, 2015). The way forward is unclear. As Cheng (2016: 403) argues:

> contrary to the conventional view that political consciousness and collective participation expedite the transition to democracy, what we have witnessed in Hong Kong is a growing polarisation between the state and civil society and within civil society. Instead, the paradox of regime instability and longevity seems to endure in hybrid regimes faced with mass protests.

As another controversial aspect of colonial legacy, some argue that the disaffection and (in certain cases) radicalisation that some of Hong Kong’s young people are experiencing today is a result of a misplaced relative deprivation (Zamecki, 2018). For instance,
research involving focus groups with Hong Kong students reveal a nostalgia for the colonial past that resembles a romantic mythologisation. Zamecki’s (2018: 469) focus group discussions revealed, for instance, that students (with no direct memories of the colonial past) believed Hong Kong to be ‘more responsive to the citizens’ demands’ under British colonial rule than it actually was (see also Endacott, 1964; Loh and Civic Exchange, 2006; Ngo, 1999). The colonial past was felt to be ‘somehow better’, as one student articulated, due to ‘the government listening to the people of Hong Kong’ (Zamecki, 2018: 469). Interestingly, some young protesters during the AEBM brandished British-era flags, clearly linking the demands of localism to the notion of ‘freedoms’ held during the colonial past (Vukovich, 2019: 157; see also Coulson, 15 September 2019 for a more detailed explication of motivations involved).

We raise these developments to highlight the complexities and ambiguous interpretations of Hong Kong’s colonial ‘implied objective past’. However, there are also material circumstances in the present that help contextualise the involvement of young people and the growing influence of localism; for example, the ever-increasing social inequalities and economic polarisation in Hong Kong. An increasing number of both retirees and young people are falling under the poverty threshold (Lee et al., 2014), and Hong Kong’s Gini coefficient (which tracks levels of economic inequality and disparity) currently ranks one of the highest in the world: 0.525 in 2001, climbing to 0.539 in 2017 (with 0.4 indicating an ‘international inequality threshold alert line’, cited in Cabestan and Florence, 2018: 4; see also The Hong Kong Council of Social Service, 2021). Indeed, while Hong Kong (as of 2015) sports the highest number of multimillionaires in the world, 20% of its residents live below the poverty line (Hargreaves, 2015).

Young people feel pessimistic over owning their own flat given skyrocketing real estate prices, and the ‘post-80s’ generation often expresses a bleak outlook on their own future sense of socio-economic agency (Wong and Wan, 2018). A related challenge is the growing presence of subdivided units (sometimes colloquially referred to as ‘cage homes’) (Wee and Kwan, 2020). Spurred by a lack of public housing, many are forced to live (and still pay rent) in flats that are subdivided by literal metal cages, where those who reside in them – often verging on destitution – can store a small amount of their possessions (Hargreaves, 2015). A 2016 Hong Kong Government report indicated there were 210,000 subdivided flats in Hong Kong, with about 25% occupied by students 18 years old or younger (cited in Cabestan and Florence, 2018: 4). Other reports indicate a rise of those aged between 15 and 24 years living in subdivided flats, increasing from 12.4% in 2013 to 28.4% in 2016 (and with 12.1% under 14 years in 2013).1

These wider material circumstances come into friction with the socio-political tensions driving the localist movement in Hong Kong and, more widely, concerns over the city’s resinicisation by Beijing. Economic polarisation drives, if not further underscores, ongoing rifts, including those ‘for and against’ the HKPF, Hong Kong Government, as well as mainland China’s sovereignty over the territory. It seems likely, however, that the increasing drive of localism, as well as the arguably draconian socio-legal responses pushed by Beijing with the help of colonial-era instruments of crime control and punishment, will drive greater numbers of protesters to have contact with the legal system and, in some cases, suffer the consequences of a criminal record. As we highlighted above,
some young protesters may be branded as ‘terrorists’ in their protest actions. Given sufficient numbers over time, a deepened subculture of political dissent will likely emerge that may well see their ostracisation from the licit world to be a marker of legitimacy itself. Punishment, in this society and in relation to actions seen as contravening new legislations aimed at quashing dissent, such as the National Security Law, may produce a permanent subculture of denizens in Hong Kong, whose fate will come to greatly affect the city’s socio-political future.

Considering post-colonial directions for criminology, Chris Cunneen (2011: np) observes that ‘colonization and the postcolonial are not historical events but continuing social, political, economic, and cultural processes’ [added emphasis]. Punishment, he adds, is a ‘moral censure reinforcing the boundaries of the nation’, and that ‘the limits of belonging to the nation can also become the boundaries of the moral community. To be outside the moral community is to be susceptible to the violence of the state’. Post-colonial perspectives consider as analytically central questions of sovereignty, citizenship and identity (Cunneen, 2011). Empirically situated studies in criminology examining policing, punishment and state-citizen relations are essential in understanding the complex contexts and outcomes facing post-colonial societies (e.g. Tankebe, 2008). Still, criminology has yet to fully integrate theoretical and conceptual insights from colonial and post-colonial studies that have had longstanding impacts in sociology, anthropology and other disciplines (e.g. Bhabha, 2012; Fanon, 2004 [1963]; Hall, 2001; Said, 1994 [1979]). Greater inclusion of these approaches will attend to the insight that post-colonial legacies are not only historically situated markers, but ongoing, complex legacies.

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Notes
1. While in the years prior to the 1997 handover, pro-democrats were winning seats in the Legislative Council with campaigns that Beijing perceived to be ‘anti-China’, the post-handover period saw a ‘fading out of the “China factor”’, with the Chinese Communist Party rarely debated in elections and with relatively few criticisms directed at Beijing at the time (see Ma, 2015: 44). It is also likely that China’s milestones achieved during this time, including hosting the 2008 Olympics in Beijing and launching their first crewed spaceflight in 2003, helped to quell anxieties and discord related to localism in Hong Kong (Kwong, 2016a).
2. See https://www.basiclaw23.gov.hk/english/download/s3200307077.pdf for more details about the proposed bill.
3. See http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2014/08/23/content_281474982986578.htm for more details.
4. See http://www.2017.gov.hk/filemanager/template/en/doc/20140831b.pdf for more details.
5. The pro-independence movement reportedly is perceived as violating three ‘bottom lines’ of the Chinese state. The then director of the Central Government Liaison Office articulated these bottom lines in an interview with a local Chinese media broadcaster, China Central Television: ‘No one is permitted to engage in any form of activity that harms national sovereignty and security, or challenges the authority of the Central government or Hong Kong’s Basic Law, or uses Hong Kong to infiltrate and subvert the mainland’s social and political stability’. For more details, see https://www.thestandard.com.hk/section-news/section/11/178081/Three-bottom-lines-to-halt-indy-push
6. See https://www.legco.gov.hk/yr18-19/english/bills/b201903291.pdf for more details.
7. The following popular requests organically became the defining list of requirements that the AEBM wanted addressed: (1) withdrawal of the extradition bill; (2) amnesty for the arrested protesters; (3) establishing an independent commission to review police’s conduct and alleged brutality during the mass protests; (4) rescinding the ‘rioters’ classification of protesters; and (5) resignation of the incumbent Chief Executive and promising universal suffrage for the elections of Chief Executive and LegCo members (Independent Police Complaints Council, 2020: 52).
8. Among other incidences, from 2015 to 2017, the disappearances, confirmed extrajudicial detentions, and uncanny reappearances of five local booksellers (whose bookstores sold ‘subversive’ political content critical of Beijing) served as a potent reminder that even the city’s cherished civil liberties, rule of law, and rights and freedoms may not adequately protect residents from mainland China’s reach (Ortmann, 2016).
9. These surveys, titled Crime and Its Victims in Hong Kong, were discontinued after 2007.
10. The 2013 Policy Survey Report on Subdivided Units in Hong Kong can be found in the link: https://www.legco.gov.hk/yr12-13/english/panels/hg/hg_lths/papers/hg_lths0626eb1-1371-3-e.pdf. The ‘Thematic Report: Persons living in Subdivided Units’ of the 2016 Hong Kong Population By-census can be found in the link: https://www.statistics.gov.hk/pub/B11201022016XXXXB0100.pdf

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