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**Speaking against Silence:
Finding a Voice in Hong Kong Chinese Families through the Umbrella Movement**

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Speaking against Silence: Finding a Voice in Hong Kong Chinese Families through the Umbrella Movement

Abstract

While social movement researchers have investigated how personal relationships and emotional attachments are implicated in activism, less attention has been given to the ways in which activism affects personal lives. This paper addresses this issue, drawing on interviews and focus groups with the Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement's active participants, bystanders and opponents to explore its consequences for family life. While those who were not involved in the movement articulated an acceptance of hierarchical family structures and their imposed silences, movement activists saw their experience of the occupation as enabling them to find a voice within their families. The Umbrella Movement, we suggest, has opened up a space for the reflexive exploration of personal life and raised the possibility of modifying Hong Kong family practices.

Keywords: Family Practices; Hong Kong; Social Movements; Emotional Reflexivity

Introduction

Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement was a mass protest in the form of 79 days of occupation between 26 September and 15 December 2014 in three key locations, blocking main arterial roads through the city.¹ The movement was part of a wider struggle for democracy and genuine universal suffrage in Hong Kong. It developed from the 'Occupy Central' campaign against the decision of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (NPCSC) not to allow a fully democratic election of the Hong Kong Chief Executive 2017. The eventual occupation was far larger, more extensive and long-lasting than had been anticipated. It was triggered by a student strike and demonstration against the NPCSC ruling, resulting in an occupation of the main roads in the Admiralty district, close to the government offices, which quickly spread to Causeway Bay and Mongkok. The police initially responded with tear gas and pepper spray, against which the demonstrators protected themselves with umbrellas – hence the 'Umbrella Movement'. For the protesters, the occupation was an extremely intense experience. For others, whether sympathetic or not, it was inescapable: it was a central preoccupation of the population at large, dominated the news daily and disrupted the usual rhythm of life in Hong Kong – as well as the traffic. The campaign for democracy and associated political turmoil has since continued up to and beyond the Legislative Council elections in July 2016 and the Chief Executive election in 2017. Political opinion remains sharply divided, opening up deep rifts in Hong Kong Society which affect both public and private life.

This paper is concerned with the relationship between participation or non-participation in the democracy movement and personal life, particularly the ways individuals 'do family' in the context of political turbulence. We are interested in both the politics of the personal and the personal consequences of politics, Venturing into the overlapping of the public and the private opens up a space for us to explore how campaigning for democratization of society might promote aspirations for the democratization of family relationships and how intimacy, which is traditionally considered as private and apolitical in Hong Kong, might become a site of political engagement.

We focus particularly on the ways in which Hong Kong Chinese family practices, which still tend to emphasize harmony and hierarchy (Chu and Yu, 2010; Sechiyama, 2013; Jackson and Ho, 2013; Kong et. al., 2016), might be brought into question as a result of political events. For participants in the Umbrella Movement, we argue, the struggle for democratic freedom became enmeshed with family tensions and was integral to how they made sense of themselves in facing up to authoritarian families and government. Whereas Chan and Ng (2016) found that family disagreement acts as a deterrent to political participation, our participants' stories suggest that when the political stakes are high, this may not always be so.

We begin by situating our project in relation to relevant literature on social movements and families and relationships, before outlining our project and its methodology. We then go on to analyse how family relationships figure in the narratives of both non-participants and participants in the Umbrella movements and how participants, most of whom found themselves at odds with their families, sought to renegotiate family practices. In many of these narratives, individuals constructed reflexive accounts of self-transformation (movement activists) or resistance to change (bystanders and opponents).

Politics and family life

The commitment to the politics of the personal, which was central to second wave feminism, led many activists to seek alternatives to oppressive family relationships in their personal lives (see, Red Collective, 1978; Jackson and Scott, 1996, 2004). Yet within mainstream social movement literature there is relatively little work exploring the personal consequences of social movements relative to that on their political impact, as has been noted in influential overviews of the field (McAdam, 1999; Guigni, 2004) Personal relationships also feature more prominently in social movement research on how mobilization happens (see, e.g. McAdam, 1993; Walder, 2009; Goldstone and McAdam, 2001). Within this body of literature, only that on that on the individual biographical consequences of political contention has a bearing on our concerns.

Much of the pioneering work in this small field was concerned with New Left Activism in the USA, including civil rights activism, in the 1960s and 1970s (e.g. Whalen and Flacks 1980; Fendrich 1993). Among the most influential is McAdam's (1989) study of participants in the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer. These activists formed new relational ties that in turn sustained longer term political commitment. As McAdam notes in a commentary on these early studies, they suggest 'a powerful and enduring effect of participation on the later lives of the activists', despite differences in samples and methodologies (McAdam, 1999: 121). These effects include continued left-wing political commitments, careers in teaching or the helping professions and a greater likelihood of remaining single.

More recent work summarised by Guigni (2004) covers a wider range of movements and includes those involved in lower level, more routine forms of participation than the 'high risk' activism featured in some of the earlier studies, but with similar findings. Much of this work is based on large scale surveys, which Guigni sees as a distinct advantage over earlier studies based on smaller samples. Such surveys do indicate some significant consequences of activism over individuals' life courses, including long term: for example that they are more likely to cohabit, have no children, be unemployed or work in particular occupations, but they tell us little or nothing about how activists make sense of the impact of political participation on their lives. They also, in focusing on life course effects, say little about the ways in which activism might affect individuals' *existing* close personal relationships during and in the immediate aftermath of episodes of intense activism. This is what we address here.

The approaches we have found most productive are those that consider the conditions under which and processes whereby social movement participants experience a break with their past selves and world views. One such is Yang's (2000) study of the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution. He argues that social movements can have 'liminal' effects, involving detachment from the everyday social world, 'when much of what has been bound by social structure is "liberated", and the transgression of norms and conventions becomes possible,' (ibid: 383). Thus, during the period when the Red Guards were travelling away from home to 'exchange revolutionary experience' (ibid 389) they

underwent both an emotional and cognitive ‘self-awakening’ (ibid: 396). Social movements, Yang concludes, can provide a setting in which ‘freedom, egalitarianism, communion, and creativity’ are valorised (ibid: 398) and reflexive self-transformation can occur.

In a rather similar vein Debra King (2006) explores how activists come to distance themselves from and challenge hegemonic constructions of the world. For King’s Australian activists there was no physical separation from their everyday place in the world as was the case of the Red Guards, but a cognitive and emotional one achieved through developing self-reflection and emotional reflexivity. In more recent unpublished work (King, 2016),² she posits the idea of an epistemic break resulting from the experience of confrontation and moral shock, prompting the emotional reflexivity that deepens commitment to activism. Here reflexivity is both emotional and cognitive, with an emotional response to injustice – shock, anger, outrage – leading activists to question themselves and seek a new world view.

For both Yang and King, then, there is some form of separation or distancing from quotidian reality facilitating a reflexive remaking of the self. Whereas both Yang and King are interested in the movements themselves, we apply these ideas, particularly King’s conceptualisation of epistemic breaks and emotional reflexivity, to understand how the self-remaking provoked by the umbrella movement is played out in the context of individuals’ relationships with their families. This was particularly the case for activists who were part of the Umbrella Movement, who experienced the liminal space of weeks on the streets and the epistemic break that this engendered – not only through negative experiences of confrontations with the police but the positive experiences to which Yang draws attention – freedom, egalitarianism, communalism and creativity, apprehended both cognitively and emotionally.

What the umbrella movement – and the wider democracy movement – have been fighting for is not only democracy but greater autonomy and freedom from control by China. One consequence of this resistance to political authoritarianism is a parallel resistance to domestic authoritarianism which our study reveals. There has been a long tradition of

feminist critique of inequalities within families (see e.g. Delphy and Leonard, 1992). Chinese families, like those of other Confucian cultures, have traditionally been marked by pronounced gender and generational hierarchies based on a strong collectivist orientation and emphasis on harmony (Chang and Song, 2010; Choi and Ting, 2009; Sechiyama, 2013; Yan et al. 2005). These characteristics are still evident in many Hong Kong Chinese families and continue to impose restrictions on junior members. Moreover, hierarchically imposed harmony is also consonant with the emphasis on harmony in the Chinese Party State's propaganda promoting a 'harmonious society' (Ringen, 2016), to which the family is seen as central.

While paying attention to inequalities, it is equally important to take account of the actual practices of family life – the ways in which families are sustained and may change through everyday practices. In this respect we take inspiration from David Morgan's (2011) work on family practices and Jamieson's (2011) concept of 'practices of intimacy'. In focusing on interpersonal relations and the everyday ways in which individuals enact family relationships, this approach allows for individual agency while not ignoring issues of power and inequality. As Jamieson (2011) notes, practices of intimacy are not always egalitarian. We can therefore consider the possibility of 'intimate injustices' (Ho et. al., 2014) that shape the experience of the individuals when facing conflicts and political disagreements within their families.

Our aim in this paper, then, is to consider how the experience of the Umbrella Movement informs understandings of family practices and practices of intimacy within families, in particular in relation to challenges to hierarchical harmony in Chinese families and the wider political culture.

The Study

This was not a pre-planned study but was occasioned by extraordinary and unexpected circumstances. Our methodology evolved as we sought ways to understand the impact of the umbrella Movement on Hong Kong citizens' lives, informed by our existing interest

in personal and family life. The data we present here derive from three sources: two sets of interviews with five paired men, who were strangers to each other, conducted before and after the occupation; a mixed gender focus group with five men and six women and another with five young women activists. All participants were Hong Kong Chinese apart from one mainland woman. We recruited through personal networks, by far the most productive approach in East Asian contexts. It fits ‘somewhat more naturally with Confucian mores and expectations than attempting to recruit unknown individuals who lie outside networks’ (Park and Lunt 2015 np). Recruiting through known and trusted intermediaries helps to induce people to participate and to build rapport; in Chinese societies this is related to the importance of personal connections, *guanxi* (see, e.g. Liu 2007). This strategy also enabled us to ensure that our small sample was as diverse as possible. The men interviewed and the members of the mixed focus group came from a variety of class backgrounds and a range of occupations, ages, sexualities and political orientations. The women activists group was more homogenous, comprising women aged from their early twenties to early thirties. There is, therefore, an imbalance in the sample in terms of gender and political orientations: whereas all the women were involved in the movement to some degree, only four of the men were.

The interviews with pairs of men were begun initially for another purpose – exploring men’s understandings of their intimate relationships as part of a larger study on Hong Kong men (Ho, 2014). It was these interviews that alerted us to the relevance of the political situation for personal life. The first three pairs were interviewed in July 2014, before the Umbrella Movement occurred, but when Occupy Central was active. Significantly these men referred often to the political situation in accounting for and justifying their (mis)conduct in intimate relationships. When the occupation occurred the project was suspended due to the disruption it caused. In April 2015 we resumed interviewing, involving two more pairs of men and conducting second interviews with all five pairs. At this stage the occupation became a central issue. For the men it was something they could not help but talk about: although only four had actively participated, it had affected all their lives in some way. At the same time we, as researchers, had become interested in the consequences of movement participation for

our core area of concern – personal and intimate life. We therefore proceeded from the men’s political preoccupations and probed further into the meanings of the Umbrella Movement for them, whether and how it affected their everyday lives and relationships and how they made sense of this.

In May 2015 (6-months after the end of the occupation), as we wished to enquire further into the personal consequences of the Umbrella Movement, we conducted the mixed-gender focus group. Some of these men and women had been on the streets throughout the occupation, some had supported it in other ways; others were bystanders, among whom attitudes to the movement varied from sympathetic to hostile. This made for some heated and often emotional exchanges, but also produced very self-reflexive accounts of the impact of the movement on their lives. The discussion in the focus group emerged from responses to our first question: do you think the Umbrella Movement was a success or a failure? Surprisingly, most perceived it as a success, despite it not achieving its political goals. The movement’s supporters did not evaluate success in terms of constitutional changes but focused on personal transformation, increased social awareness, and renegotiated family relationships. Those who had not participated in or supported the movement also talked about its wider impact on everyday life. We subsequently asked them to elaborate on these points, eliciting narratives about their personal lives and relationships. In August 2015 we conducted the focus group with young women activists, having been alerted to particular problems they faced during the occupation. They were asked about their experience of the occupation itself, which raised issues about gender relations within the movement, and about the impact their involvement had had on their relationships with others, both inside and outside the movement.

In interviews and focus groups we sought to create dialogical spaces that fostered interaction between participants, encouraging them to exchange views and experiences across their differences. The resultant data were recorded and transcribed in the original Cantonese. The original interview language was used for analysis, which we see as essential to preserving nuances in meaning: how participants talk about their practices of intimacy, how they locate themselves in relation to others and what this reveals about

how they make sense of themselves and their social circumstances. Later we undertook careful translations into English of selected data extracts for publication purposes. Data analysis was conducted in an inductive, open and flexible manner to facilitate the development of alternative understandings of people's family and political participation. Full verbatim transcriptions were coded line-by-line, while themes that emerged from data were consolidated to form the basis of our analysis. The narratives presented in this paper are considered as both topic and resource (Plummer, 2001). As resource they tell us something about Hong Kong family life, but they are also reflexively constructed stories of self (Jackson, 2010) and were produced as situated performances of self (Presser 2005). These stories are also situated in time: told shortly after the event and told both to us, as researchers, and to co-participants. Narratives of the past are always constructed from the standpoint of the present (Jackson, 2010); they are products of the sense made of events at the moment they are told, including the temporal distance from the events they recount, and are shaped by the audience to which they are told (Andrews, 2007).

This approach to our participants' accounts necessitated paying close attention to how men and women reflexively made sense of their lives and relationships. Reflexivity as we understand it is relational: it is not simply an internal conversation with oneself (Holmes, 2010), but is fundamentally social, a capacity developed through an interplay between self-other relations and internal dialogue. Following Mead (1934) we see it as foundational to a social self that is never fixed but can change with time and circumstance. Mead's theorization allows for differing degrees of reflexivity (Author B, 2010), from the basic ability to orient ourselves to and interact with others to more complex, self-conscious self-examination. It is novel situations that are likely to produce such heightened reflexivity (Mead, 1934, 1964; Author B, 2010). For many of our participants, the novel experience of the Umbrella Movement created an epistemic break that led to a reflexive rethinking of themselves and their relations with others. This process was not only cognitive but also emotional, in keeping with Holmes' view that that the 'reflexive self is formed by emotional relations to others' (Holmes, 2010: 142).

Non-Participants in the Movement: Preserving the Existing Order

Among participants in our study, orientations to the Umbrella Movement tended to coincide with attitudes to family life. Both those who had participated in the occupation and those who did not made explicit reference to the generational and gendered hierarchies that shape Hong Kong Chinese familial culture, but the bystanders were more accepting of the status quo. These were all men, which may be a coincidence and an effect of our sampling, but may also reflect men's vested interests – although there were also men who were very active in the movement. The non-participating men were not immune to the effects of the movement. As one, Hei, said 'we were all in the whirlpool whether we agreed with it or not.' Hei was among the bystanders who were sympathetic to the aims of the movement and drew attention to the parallel hierarchies of family and state:

Around ten years ago, I did not challenge what my father chose for me. To a certain extent it was because I trusted him. I thought it was okay to let him choose. Now I have grown up, I think I cannot let the government choose for me. Unfortunately, the government also dares not to let us choose for ourselves. (Hei 36|M, Fire station chief)

Although Hei raised the possibility of challenging hierarchical authority, he was hesitant to do so in practice, considering it too risky. He also explicitly defended patriarchal authority – his own – in the family, still wanting to make decisions for his children and not expecting his wife to disagree with him. He described himself as 'the boss in the house' and as 'not democratic but loyal'.

The men who did not participate in the occupation often claimed that they sought to preserve the stability of Hong Kong. Some were critical of China's autocratic rule over Hong Kong, but they remained ambivalent about challenging it. They frequently employed a familial idiom, common in Hong Kong when referring to the Beijing government, the ultimate powerful master, as '*Ah Yae*' (阿爺), paternal grandfather,

thereby referencing the traditional patriarchal and patrilineal characteristics of Chinese families. Tom (M 40+, civil servant), for example, suggested tactfully dealing with 'grandpa' by being 'humble' and 'harmless', because the real power is in the hands of grandpa, not his small grandson, Hong Kong. From such idioms we can sense the deep-rooted patriarchal belief that people have no other choice than to comply with patriarchal authority.

'Happiness before rights' and 'not knowing enough to be involved in politics' were tropes often employed by non-participants to justify the preservation of hierarchy within and outside the family. Hei fell into the first camp, feeling that he had too much to lose to take action against Beijing's power – and would also risk his family's well-being for which he, as head of the family, was responsible. Other movement non-participants talked a great deal about being happy with their lives and saw little benefit in rocking the boat and offending '*Ah Yae*'. Hing, who was opposed to the occupation, thought that Hong Kong people should be content with what they had rather than asking for 'one person one vote' and focusing too much on 'rights': '... I think Hong Kong people ask [for] too much – the Umbrella Movement people are not rational' (Hing 60+|M, bus driver). He complained that the occupation had disrupted his family life as he spent so long trapped in traffic jams caused by blocked roads that he hardly had any 'quality time' to spend with his wife. Like Hing, Shmily, a gay man in his seventies, said that people should appreciate the government more: 'If you don't ask too much, you will be happier' he said.

The idea that those in authority know better was also evident in Shmily's account. He said his family had taught him not to take a public stand and care about public issues and that he had not even taken to the streets in his youth when 1.5 million Hong Kong people demonstrated against the 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre. He went on: 'In my opinion as a gay man, those who do not possess political wisdom should not participate in politics... You do not know anything. Then why do you speak about it?' Shmily thus represents himself as both a subordinate in the family and accepting of the authority of his elders and the government, as well as lacking the knowledge to take action – which he then extends to others: the ignorant and subordinate are not qualified to challenge the powerful. Unlike Hing, he did not express strong opposition to the movement; rather he

did not see himself as having a right to a political opinion. Whereas Hing, like some non-participants in Hensby's (2015) study, dis-identified with movement activists – they are 'not rational' – Shmily is critical of them but includes himself among those lacking in political wisdom.

These men, while ultimately supporting or capitulating to the existing order, nonetheless demonstrate reflexivity and a relational sense of self. Ultimately, they are willing to accept the status quo and the authority of grandfather in Beijing. To do otherwise would pose a risk to the lives they have struggled to build for themselves and their families.

The movement participants: Finding a Voice

The movement activists also spoke of families in which the authority of patriarchs went unchallenged, but for them the movement had produced an epistemic break, giving them both a new perspective on, and an impetus to question, that authority. Many of them told stories of personal transformation that enabled them to challenge or at least passively resist the constraints families imposed upon them, which contrasted with the friendship, solidarity and new perspectives on the world that they experienced in the occupation.

These participants often referred to the family patriarch – the father or, in one instance, an elder brother as autocratic or 'the boss'. In a particularly extreme case, Keung told of how he had been bullied and beaten up by his elder brother. He said 'Since my parents' death my big brother has been the boss. No-one dares to say no to him.' Yet he had found the courage in the context of the occupation to take to the streets in defiance of his family. In the focus group he contested Hei's claim that loyalty could compensate for a lack of domestic democracy:

[My elder brother] is very loyal to me. He treats me as his little brother. But when I fight for my right to speak, he would never listen. This is a challenge to him so he treats me violently...It is important that he listens to me, know what I want, or just listen to what I have to say, but he never listens. (Keung 50+|M, retired)

Activists' narratives often included a description of the ways in which potential disagreements within families had been masked by silence until the Umbrella Movement rendered silence untenable. Lydia, for example recounted how her personal values were not important for her parents, 'they do not want to accept the idea that society needs to respect diversity'. She explained how such differences had been dealt with in her family:

Our family is not good at handling differences in opinions. Our general pattern is that, someone says something, if you do not agree then you keep silent. This is our way of managing our family problems. Our silence is our solution... *But in this event when you cannot be silent*, this reveals the underlying problem. You have to solve the problem... Actually this is not limited to democracy. This is the change that is needed in the modes of human relationships. (Lydia 30+|F, researcher, our emphasis)

Maintaining harmony for the collective benefit of the family is important in Chinese culture; children are expected to take responsibility for the wellbeing of seniors in the family, which includes not bringing shame to them and ensuring they maintain face (Zhang 2016). Yet, as Lydia indicates, this has broken down in the context of the Umbrella Movement, which suggested to her that human relationships needed to change. The epistemic break that facilitated such insights functions in narratives such as this as a turning point, or what Denzin (1989) calls an 'epiphany', on which the narrative hinges. Wing also presented an account that turned on 'the event', leading her to question her family's imposed, silencing consensus.

Basically we do not quarrel at home. My father is like a boss. My mother just listens to my father. Then the whole family would be silent. Only *since this event I have discovered my parents are not always right.*' (Wing 20+|F, teacher, lesbian, our emphasis)

Wing later contrasted her experience of the movement with her previous strategies for avoiding conflict over her lesbianism, by never coming out to her parents: 'if we do not touch on this topic [sexuality] there would not be conflicts'. The occupation, however,

was not a topic that could be avoided, it dominated the media and daily life so that ‘you couldn’t get away from it.’ Silence could be used by subordinates, as it had been for Wing, as a means of making space for themselves without damaging familial harmony. For both Lydia and Wing, however, this had become less viable. Disparate political stances towards the Umbrella Movement exposed underlying tensions in these families and silence has been replaced by a struggle to find a voice against the authoritarian familial consensus. A number of other participants also spoke about how the movement had provided them with an impetus for self-reflection leading them to resist authoritarian elders and develop independent thinking.

It was not only subordinates within families who told stories of self-transformation and changing family relationships. One of the most striking examples we have is from Thomas, who represented himself as a reformed patriarch. He had spent 60 days in the occupation during which he said that he ‘saw a lot of beautiful and virtuous things.’ The epistemic break he experienced during the movement was one he narrates as being powerfully emotional. This ‘emotional reflexivity’ (King, 2006; Holmes, 2010) was also evident in his telling of the story, in which he disassociates his present self from his past self – the autocratic boss at work and at home.

I opened a factory in the Mainland in 2003. I missed the growing up of my [elder] daughter in those ten years... I remember writing her letters during the Occupation. That was the first time I apologized to her. I was also that kind of autocratic person especially because I am an elder son. I decided most things, big or small. I told her I was wrong... The biggest effect of the whole movement on me is that I became softer. I thought I was a really tough person in the past. The time I spent crying during the occupy movement was ten times that of the past 50 years... (Thomas 56| M, Businessman)

Thomas’s story suggests that the heightened reflexivity experienced through the occupation had created the potential for greater familial equality and intimacy than had previously existed. It was because he was the position of the patriarch that greater family democracy became possible – he could choose to relinquish his authority. The only other

instance of family solidarity being enhanced through the movement was one in which there was no immediate patriarchal authority: a single mother, Venus, who told us that her participation in the occupation had strengthened her bonds with her teenage daughters:

I told them I have to do something meaningful outside [the home]. They cooked their dinner at home themselves. Therefore my relationship with them became closer. Because I believe in them I generated a lot of discussions with them. Their school did not teach them anything like this and did not let them wear the yellow ribbon³ to school... I really wanted them to fight for this and they did it. My daughters wore yellow schoolbags to school... Later on I brought my children to camp on the street. (Venus 55| F, administrator)

In most cases, however, the activists found themselves at odds with their families. Having become critical of the silence imposed by hierarchical harmony, they had to find strategies to cope with intra-familial political differences and opposition to their participation in the occupation. Unlike Thomas, they were subordinates in their families with little power to effect change.

Intrafamilial conflict and negotiation

Movement participants created a range of new practices of intimacy to deal with the tension and conflicts made manifest by the umbrella movement. For some this created actual or potential rifts, for others it meant retreating back into silence to sustain harmonious familialism to maintain a safe space for themselves within the family. In one case tensions rose to such a pitch that it created a major rift in the family. Chrystal, a young woman activist moved out of the family home because her 'stiff-necked' mother refused to compromise – and so did she. She felt that she had no option but to move out and 18 months later it had not been possible for her to return. This drastic strategy incurred significant personal costs – without a home she was reliant on sleeping on others' sofas and has been cut off from her entire family. She told us that she had recently

wanted to buy a toy for her little brother, then realised she no longer knew what he would like.

Peggy had considered splitting up from her husband because he did not support the movement: 'I nearly wanted to initiate a divorce. I told my husband: "I would never have married you if I'd known your political stance." I was actually very emotional.' Peggy's story, however, did not end in divorce: her refusal to remain silent and decision to challenge her husband's political views had a better outcome than might have been expected. Although she did not manage to change his attitudes to the movement he nonetheless tolerated her involvement and provided practical support of a kind that enabled her, despite arguments, to continue:

I thanked him for taking care of the family. I always had sick leave and did not go to work [during the occupation]. We have a mortgage and he took care of all the financial burden so that I could be free to go there [to the occupation] anytime. Sometimes I did not go home to sleep, but he did not make any complaint. I came back the next day at 6am and we even had an argument. He then went to work and I went to sleep. I thank him for being so accommodating. (Peggy 25+|F, social worker).

Peggy and her husband thus arrived at some kind of accommodation, adjusting their family practices to enable her to spend nights at the occupation. Others were less successful. Gin encountered emotional blackmail across the barricades – literally. Her brother is a policeman and they came face to face on opposing sides in the early days of the occupation. She described how her brother, instead of ordering her around as he usually did, begged her to leave:

He said he did not want to arrest me. Also he needed to live his life. He loves what he does. He wants to advance.... Then he started crying. I understood and I wanted to preserve his dignity. I said I understood... Because his wife was just pregnant, they were going to be parents. (Gin 25+|F, Designer)

Gin did succumb to this entreaty, but it did not end there. Like most of the participants in

our study, she spoke of ‘avoiding confrontation’ as fundamental to family life, but she found a way to try to establish a dialogue. Gin’s account offers insights into many participants’ willingness to compromise. Caught between her political convictions and her emotional ties to her brother, she tried to stand up for her opinions while demonstrating her care for her brother, his wife and the baby they were expecting.

I told him he did not need to be afraid. His sister is not doing bad things; she is just fighting for things for you and your children that he cannot fight for in his position...He may not even believe in this...I asked him to believe in Hong Kong people. We fight for their next generation including his children. (Gin 25+|F, Designer)

She then videoed herself playing ‘Let it be’ to her family on the guitar ‘because I was really helpless at that point. Therefore I used music to express my distress.’ She hoped that this might help them understand and perhaps change. Gin represented this strategy as a means of promoting mutual respect and understanding, which she saw as an important part of democracy. Others also tried to keep the dialogue open, to persuade other family members of their right to their position even if they continued to disagree. Lydia tried but failed to convince her brother of her views on democracy. However, she still saw her effort as worthwhile.

My elder brother was not in Hong Kong at that time... We talked on phone for three hours to convince each other. At the end we gave up... Although he did not support what I did, he thought I understood what I was doing... After we talked he would believe I was not blinded by passion. He always thinks women are too romantic that they do not understand what they are doing. (Lydia 30+|F, researcher)

Both Lydia and Gin sought a non-confrontational exchange through which opposing voices could be heard. While this did not produce consensus, a degree of understanding, and the dialogical space necessary for it, could be maintained. This suggests a small, but possibly significant, shift in practices of intimacy within their families. Others were less successful in achieving this, but expressed hope for respect and validation from their families. Keung, who had a history of mental health problems and was bullied not only

by his patriarchal elder brother but also by his sister, provides an example.

My sister always thought I was susceptible to others that I would rush to Lung Wo Road, occupy the road and sleep in the tent. She always called me to check my whereabouts. I think it was quite autocratic to ask me not to take to the streets. Actually her words were hurtful. Sometimes I did not want to fight against her and upset her. Therefore I said yes unthinkingly but actually I would take to the streets. I want to get from her words of affirmation. I want her to know I have my own opinions. I will take responsibility for what I do. (Keung 57|M, retired, on social security)

Participants who experienced such autocratic control at home expressed a wish to change the silencing ‘non-confrontational’ loyalty embedded in Hong Kong familial culture. Whereas Keung coped with family pressure through subterfuge, Wing said that she had learnt to stand up and speak for herself. Of her father she said: ‘I know I actually can refuse to comply with his rules’. Yet she would also have liked to say ‘I love you’ to him, something very uncommon in Chinese families, indicating her hope that their relationship could contain their differences. Similarly Peggy expressed her continued commitment to making her marriage work despite her political disagreements with her husband. For these activists, struggling to have their voices heard within the family ran parallel to campaign to have their voice heard by the central government. Their claims for democracy in the family were modest: they wanted to be able to air their opinions and have them respected, to develop a negotiated intimacy that preserved family ties rather than requiring but no longer required total subservience.

Concluding Discussion

These aspirations for renegotiated intimacy are consonant with the emphasis on doing, variability and fluidity in the conceptualisation of family and intimate practices. This approach, however, also focuses on the everyday, the routine, the habitual (Morgan 2011). Considering what happens when everyday routines are disrupted by external

events, as in the case of the umbrella Movement, is therefore of significance to the further development of this approach. The accounts of our activist participants tell of two forms of such disruption. The first is practical – the reshaping of domestic routines necessitated by spending time on the streets. The second, which could interconnect with the first, is the questioning of what was previously taken for granted as ‘normal’ family life. The novel situation of the occupation and the issues this raised for their families engendered new forms of reflexive sense-making, particularly when the avoidance of conflict, so central to maintaining hierarchical harmony, was longer tenable. Thus not only were family practices unsettled, but those practices themselves became a site of contention.

This reappraisal of family practices was a product of the critical and emotional reflexivity developed during the occupation, and the epistemic break that facilitated it, which also underpinned the stories of self-transformation told by many activists. These narratives portrayed a move away from acceptance of the status quo within family and society towards a new view of both. Thus Thomas represents himself as a reformed patriarch while others, such as Wing, Gin and Keung, told of forging a new sense of independence from authoritarian families. These narratives suggest that Hong Kong politics has, for some, created spaces for envisaging new ways of doing gender and family, aspiring to family practices through which they might achieve ‘negotiable intimacy’ (Zhong & Ho, 2014), rather than authoritarian consensus. A politicized, reflexive interpretation of family practices not only challenges them but facilitates a more positive re-imagination of them. As Andrews argues, ‘political narratives engage the imagination, not only in constructing stories about the past and the present, but in helping to articulate a vision of an alternative world’ (2014: 86).

Those of our participants who had not been involved in the movement expressed no desire to change family life. For them security lay in preserving the status quo and in some cases, such as that of Hei, their own patriarchal privilege. Those among them who, unlike Hei, opposed the movement insisted on the need to preserve hierarchy and harmony and saw the Umbrella Movement as socially divisive, harming Hong Kong’s economy and risking the ire of ‘grandpa’ in Beijing. Thus their political non-participation was related to their ideals about personal life.

The accounts of the impact of the umbrella movement we received from our participants were produced at a particular time, relatively soon after the end of the occupation. Had we talked to them earlier or later would have heard different stories. Given that narratives are always reconstructions of past events from the standpoint of the present, distance from the past and the narrators' current circumstances matter. We also have no way of knowing what the longer term impact of Hong Kong's divisive politics on these individuals' lives might be. If Thomas were to slip back into his old patriarchal ways or if Chrystal were reconciled with her family they might frame their memories of the movement differently.

Our data, then, cannot tell us anything of the long term consequences of political upheaval on family lives, nor are we drawing causal inferences from them. These narratives do, however, begin to illuminate the circumstances under which family hierarchies might or might not be challenged and ways in which social movements may or may not contribute to reflexive self-transformation. They also raise issues of the complex intersections between gender, class and sexuality and their bearing on political choices, but not in a systematic manner. There are middle class men who felt that the movement was a threat to their comfortable life, but also working class bus and taxi drivers who also saw it as undermining what little they had. Some subordinate members of families in terms of gender and generation rebelled, but one patriarchal businessman reformed himself. An educated young lesbian told of how the difficulty of coming out motivated her to take action to change society, but the older gay man living on social security wanted nothing to do with politics. Thus orientations to the movement and perceptions of family relationships are not just about class or gender or age or sexuality. We need to consider intersections between multiple social locations as well as biographical experience before we can make sense of the choices of different individuals, which suggests the need for further research on these issues.

The strength of family ties in Hong Kong is certainly a key issue. In Hong Kong's high cost, low welfare society survival depends on the mutual material support family members provide for each other (see Jackson and Ho, 2013). But family bonds are as much emotional as instrumental. Family opposition to involvement in the movement

might well have been motivated by care and worry – fear that a child, brother or spouse might come to harm, immediately or in the future, given the repressive potential of the Chinese state. Moreover, those who participated in the occupation against the wishes of their families did not stop caring about them: love, care and conflict are intertwined in the accounts we have gathered. When politics divided families, when the imposed silence of the hierarchical harmony of Chinese families failed to contain the struggle for freedom associated with the Umbrella Movement, some decided to speak out and find their voices in the family and society. Nonetheless most of the activists juggled family connectedness and disagreement by strategizing to display affection and care, and to maintain dialogue, while not abandoning their own political commitments. In most cases there was, therefore, an element of compromise with the hierarchical family structure.

Endnotes:

¹ It was ultimately cleared away by the police.

² We cite this work with King's permission.

³ The yellow ribbon is the symbol of the pro-democracy camp.

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