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Resinicization and Digital Citizenship in Hong Kong: Youth, Cyberspace, and Claims-Making

Abstract Under the “one country, two systems” model fashioned after its handover to China in 1997, Hong Kong, a Special Administrative Region of China, is to retain its rule of law, capitalist system, and accompanying political and ideological independence. However, tensions remain centered on concerns held by many Hong Kong citizens over the “resinicization” of Hong Kong, related to anxieties regarding the putative erosion of political and ideological freedoms. This paper examines the claims-making of the student activist group Scholarism, who effectively used Facebook to raise awareness of and successfully resist a government proposal to introduce a national education curriculum into Hong Kong schools. Scholarism’s resistance and ability to mobilize mass demonstrations against the government is significant considering the lack of democratic channels in Hong Kong. Implications are explored for the examination of how claims-making in cyberspace impacts the social problems process, especially in non-democratic and post-colonial contexts.

Keywords Hong Kong; Scholarism; Political Activism; Cyberspace; Facebook; Post-Colonialism; Social Constructionism; Post-80s Youth; Netizenship; Resinicization

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Digital citizenship is a relatively new term capturing the active political awareness and organizational activities of youth online. The “net generation”—those who have grown up with the Internet and alongside the advent of online social media and social networks, including Facebook and Twitter—are not, contrary to some public opinion, disinterested, apathetic, and egocentric brats. They are politically engaged *netizens* who, through the medium of cyberspace, flip consumption practices on their heads as engaged *prosumers* (Tapscott 2009; Ritzer, Dean, and Jurgenson 2012). This paper centers on how youth in Hong Kong, especially those raised since the 1990s, are becoming the vanguard of political activism against a post-colonial government widely perceived to be under the control of the mainland Chinese government. We focus on the events surrounding a recent government proposal to introduce a curriculum of national education (NEC) in Hong Kong schools. Scholarism, a particular group mostly comprising youth born in the 1990s, took to the web, especially Facebook, to organize mass protests against this policy, and successfully overturned it. We focus on Scholarism’s Facebook claims-making as a case study to examine wider tensions in Hong Kong regarding its *resinicization* (discussed below), and to contribute to a dialogue regarding how to expand social constructionist scholarship internationally, especially in post-colonial regions that lack democratic processes. The paper begins by situating its analysis within the historical context of social constructionist scholarship, and then provides a brief background on Hong Kong’s recent history and political situation in relation to mainland China. The case study on Scholarism and the NEC cam-

aign follows, with a discussion and conclusion raising questions about how constructionist scholarship can benefit from a global and comparative constructionist imagination.

Social Constructionist Theory: Historical Roots and New Directions

Social constructionism emerged in the United States during the 1970s, as a response to sociological theory which ignored or disqualified the interpretive processes through which people perceive and react to social problems (Kitsuse and Spector 1973; Spector and Kitsuse 1973; 1977; see: Loseke 1999, chapter one). Kitsuse and Spector’s (1973:418) formulation of a sociology of social problems is geared “to account for the emergence, maintenance, and history of claims-making and responding activities.” By claims-making, they referred to “the activities of groups making assertions of grievances and claims to organizations, agencies, and institutions about some putative conditions” (Spector and Kitsuse 1973:146). Claims-making is geared to spark outrage, mobilize supporters, and lead authorities to take the necessary steps to fix the problem. Claims-making may be conducted through marches and street demonstrations, as well as through the Internet, in forms such as citizen journalism (Maratea 2014:5).

Constructionists examine claims related to youth, especially those caught up in crime and deviance, that reflect wider issues related to social order and citizenship (Spencer 2005; 2011; Adorjan 2011). How societies respond to *problem youth* illuminates much regarding salient socio-political issues and exigencies,

as well as whether youth are brought into the fold of society or rejected as outcasts. This paper will examine claims-making related to a particular group of politically active, troublesome (from the perspective of authorities) youth in Hong Kong: Scholarism. This case study focuses on how the process of claims-making in Hong Kong's social context differs from claims made in liberal democracies.

To date, the majority of constructionist studies examine liberal democracies, usually in North America or other "Western" nations, in particular, Anglophone nations with retracted welfare states (Lippert and Stenson 2010:475). Constructionist studies in non-Western regions tend to examine how social problems claims spread and diffuse internationally, usually from North American and European origins (Best 2001; see also Best 2008, chapter 10). Moreover, even when addressing non-Western nations, such comparisons are based exclusively on liberal democracies (typically Japan; but see: Xu [in this issue of QSR]). A consistent pattern of comparative analysis and theoretical development has thus been lacking in constructionist scholarship. We turn now to Hong Kong, tracing its recent history and developing political tensions related largely to its geopolitical relation to mainland China.

Resinicization Anxieties: Hong Kong's Tenuous Post Colonial Status With Mainland China

On July 01, 1997, Hong Kong ceased to be a British colony, becoming a Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) of China. Deng Xiaoping (former Paramount Leader of the People's Republic of China

[PRC]) formalized his policy of "one country, two systems" under the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration, which was implemented under Hong Kong's Basic Law following the handover. This policy meant that, in theory, Hong Kong would be able to preserve its rule of law and capitalist system without interference from mainland China for 50 years.

However, discord and distrust over Beijing's intentions for Hong Kong grew among Hong Kong citizens during the 1980s in the years leading up to the 1997 handover, leading to a crisis of legitimacy for the British colonial government (Scott 1989; Ma 2007). Anxieties were expressed about the potential interference of the mainland Chinese government in the affairs of Hong Kong. What some have dubbed the *resinicization* or *mainlandization* of Hong Kong refers 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 the PRC National People's Congress" (Lo 2007:186). Hong Kong's post-colonial governments are perceived by many sectors in society as "more illiberal and less tolerant of dissent" than the former colonial authorities (Jones and Vagg 2007:574). For instance, concerns have been increasing regarding mainland China's "interference" with the introduction of democratic processes in Hong Kong (Estes 2005:208). Recent reports indicate Hong Kong citizens' levels of dissatisfaction with governmental performance and life in Hong Kong has reached a "10-year high," with the highest levels of dissatisfaction coming from students

and people under 30 (Radio Television Hong Kong, April 30, 2014).

Young people in Hong Kong feel especially excluded from the ability to afford an education and housing, but particularly in relation to a sense of citizenship and identification with Hong Kong (Chiu and Lui 2004; Shek and Lee 2004). Some youth, especially the more socio-economically marginalized *young night drifters* and psychotropic drug abusers, are effectively outsiders from Hong Kong society. They are perpetual outcasts who count little in a region where success is equated with financial capital and contribution (Groves, Ho, and Siu 2012; Adorjan and Chui 2014, chapter 9; Groves, Siu, and Ho 2014). Shek (2007:2024-2025) has reported on the "high social stress" and "morbid emphasis on achievement" in Hong Kong that lead some youth to feel a sense of "lack of life meaning" and pessimism about social mobility. This anomie is amplified by rising levels of income disparity in Hong Kong, with the Gini Coefficient worsening from 0.451 in 1981 to 0.533 in 2007 (Government of Hong Kong 1992; Central Intelligence Agency 2014). While some are driven to drugs by such feelings of exclusion, others, especially the politically active Post-80s generation, are able to promulgate and mobilize social movements against the government. It is the latter group that we focus on in this paper.

Young people feel particularly disaffected by the lack of an audience among officials in Hong Kong. They feel there is no one listening to them, especially given the lack of democracy and putative reticence of the government to move towards uni-

versal suffrage. Presently, half of the seats in the Legislative Council (LegCo) are selected by a few elite persons and corporations, with under 10,000 business voters holding the power to usurp the wishes of Hong Kong's seven million residents, with less than 200,000 voters electing half of LegCo seats (DeGolyer 2010:2). Youth have expressed acutely their anxieties growing up under this context. For instance, one survey conducted by the Hong Kong Transition Project (which tracks public opinion of the post-colonial government and developments in Hong Kong) found that half of the 160 respondents (18-29 years old) felt that the government "always holds fake consultations" (Lee 2010). About 72% of the sample felt the government makes policy unfairly, placing the interests of others (such as citizens of mainland China) over Hong Kong citizens. In sum, many youth in Hong Kong are not optimistic about the prospect for democracy and ideological freedom.

Despite these persisting problems, optimism for change has recently been culled from particular segments of the population the Hong Kong media have dubbed *Post-80s*. Post-80s youth, who are under 30 years old, have drawn widespread media attention for their active protests against post-colonial government policies and initiatives, especially those related to the mainland Chinese government. A recent study on Post-80s youth in Hong Kong revealed that, between October 2009 and mid-January 2010, young people were three times more likely than older people to report being "very dissatisfied with life in Hong Kong" (DeGolyer 2010:11). Findings suggest, however, that young protestors are optimistic about the effectiveness of

raising awareness and taking action to combat social problems such as poverty and to fight for universal suffrage (DeGolyer 2010:43; see also Adorjan and Chui 2014, chapter 9). Sociologists often highlight the media's fascination with the deviant behavior of working class and marginal youth, and trace accompanying moral panics and escalated responses by politicians and criminal justice officials (e.g., Schissel 1997; Cohen 2002). However, while youth crime and delinquency are perhaps perennial concerns for any modern society, in Hong Kong, media and governmental attention have gravitated instead towards the educated and technologically savvy young people who use their skills to speak their truth to governmental power. Those interviewed in the media are usually college-educated, with some pursuing graduate degrees or careers in journalism, and are portrayed as technologically astute, well organized, and having a strong presence in cyberspace (Groves, Siu, and Ho 2014:835).

It is in this context that we examine the events surrounding the Hong Kong government's formal proposal, in the spring of 2012, to introduce an NEC by 2015 to replace the older curriculum on moral and civic education. Hong Kong citizens expressed concerns related to ideological encroachment, for instance, through putatively coercive governmental attempts to enforce patriotism towards mainland China; to "love China" as distinct from the onus to "love Hong Kong" (Lo 2007:186). Many groups, including the Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union, pan-Democratic politicians, and parents, viewed the proposals as an attempt to "brainwash" young students (Groves, Siu, and Ho 2014). A Chinese University of Hong Kong telephone poll

of 863 Hong Kong citizens revealed 47% had their confidence in the Chief Executive of Hong Kong weakened by its handling of the NEC proposal (Kang-chung and Chong 2012). In July, 2012, the National Education Parents' Concern Group was established, encouraging citizens to attend protest marches and in one instance mobilizing 1000 Hong Kong citizens to sign a petition sent to the government against the proposal (Chong 2012; Tang 2012). At least 115 schools refused to implement the curriculum, which was set to become mandatory by 2015. The Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union reported up to 40% of 528 primary schools considered opting out of teaching the curriculum for the first year (Chong 2012). The Union also organized a strike against the proposal (Kang-chung and Chong 2012). Other groups, such as the Hong Kong Christian Institute, also organized protests held in front of the government offices (Wei and Cheung 2012).

While there were a fair number of groups organizing claims against the government, arguably the most influential was a group of Post-90s student activists who helped galvanize the public and bring focus to the various dissident groups. This group, Scholarism, came to symbolize a new type of revolutionary class: educated, middle class netizens, who inspire others to action through Facebook. While a number of groups helped organize petitions and marches, none except Scholarism were able to sway the government's resolve to implement the mandatory NEC by 2015. This was accomplished in large part through Scholarism's ability to mobilize activism through Facebook. If the government is not willing to listen to claims-making

through normal channels, cyberspace offers a new frontier for challenging post-colonial hegemony.

The Rise of Scholarism

Scholarism was founded in 2011 by Joshua Wong Chi-fung and other secondary school students. The formation of Scholarism was directly related to the Hong Kong government's 2010 Policy Address, which "suggested a multi-staged plan to introduce National Education in Primary and Secondary Schools of HK, through teaching more information of the state and developing students' affection towards the country, so to make students self-consciously to develop a sense of thankfulness towards the Motherland" (from Facebook, May 29, 2011). Scholarism distinguished itself as the first group to pressure the government about its formal proposal in 2012 to push through the NEC. The group grew from 150 core members in 2012 to 400 by July 2013, with thousands more inspired to join in protests organized through Facebook. Many students first found out about the group through Facebook, after becoming inspired by Post-80s activists who first gained media and political attention for protests organized against a proposed rail link connecting Hong Kong with Guangzhou, China (Yeung 2013). Protestors criticized the cost of the project and argued that it would make life more difficult for Hong Kongers (Kang-chung 2010).

Scholarism's Chinese name is 學民. The group explains on its Facebook site that the first half of their Chinese name indicates their identity both as students and world citizens; Chinese citizens and Hong Kong citizens simultaneously. This conver-

gence of identities inspired Scholarism to participate, they state, in the consultations regarding the NEC. The second half of their Chinese name refers to the abandoning of "old Chinese thought" in favor of the ideas of democracy, science, and freedom of speech. Scholarism state "we decided ... to fight for freedom of speech and not brainwashing ideology of Patriotism" (from Facebook, May 29, 2011).

In the spring and summer of 2012, Scholarism was involved in a number of demonstrations alongside other groups. During the annual pro-democracy marches held on July 01, 2012, marking the anniversary of the founding of the HKSAR, Scholarism took over roadways in front of the High Court, leading protestors from the government headquarters to the Central Government of China's Liaison Office. The Liaison Office is where protests by various groups are often located, as the building is seen as a symbol of Chinese authoritarianism and a perch from which mainland officials can disseminate propaganda to Hong Kong. During the July 01, 2012 rally, Scholarism was accompanied by League of Social Democrats members and an estimated 10,000 protestors from the group People Power—both pro-democracy groups actively campaigning in Hong Kong for universal suffrage (Lee et al. 2012).

With existing groups (e.g., People Power, League of Social Democrats) supportive of their activities and coordinating mass demonstrations alongside Scholarism, Scholarism quickly brought attention to itself in media and especially through social network sites. While media coverage no doubt played a role, Scholarism's success in reversing the

government's position on national education was fueled by the audience it attracted and inspired through its Facebook site in particular. As of July 2014, Scholarism has 205,957 "fans" following the group on their Facebook page. 85% of Scholarism's fans are based in Hong Kong (174,882), with 4.5% in Taiwan (9,350), with the rest based in the United States (1.7%), Australia (1.4%), and mainland China (1.2%), presumably by supporters able to access Facebook despite the mainland Chinese government blocking the website. On average, the group gains a little over 300 fans a day and 14,000 fans per month (see: socialbakers.com). The strong connection between Scholarism and its supporters can be found in the prologue to a documentary, *Lessons in Dissent* (see: <http://vimeo.com/81571263>).

While media reports only began to track the activities of Scholarism in earnest as of late June 2012 in relation to protests the group began to organize around the proposed NEC, Scholarism was already actively using Facebook in 2011 to release statements and raise public support. They posted frequent references to the proposal as a governmental attempt at brainwashing, criticizing how teachers would have to assess students based on their emotional identification with their "motherland": "students' answers are required to be same as the government's stance" (from Facebook, May 29, 2011). Public support for Scholarism and antagonism towards the government were evident in the protests organized by Scholarism against the NEC in August 2012. At one point, an estimated 8000 protestors, from all sectors of society, including parents and their children, camped out in front of the government headquarters. Some core mem-

bers of Scholarism and supporters, including academics, engaged in a hunger strike, chanting "Dialogue! Dialogue! Dialogue!" (Chan 2012). The spirit of the event was captured by journalist Alex Lo, who wrote:

[w]ow, what a display of people's power over the weekend? What started as a debate over the new subject of national education has become a full-blown political crisis. For the government, it's no longer merely a matter of whether or when to introduce the subject, but how to ditch it without losing too much face and credibility.

You're in serious trouble if tens of thousands of protesters bring their children to occupy the government headquarters. National education becomes a lost cause as soon as thousands of parents and teachers start accusing the government of brainwashing our children. ... Officials should recognize a political defeat for what it is and quickly cut their losses. (Lo 2012; see also Adorjan and Chui 2014, chapter 9)

Victory was finally achieved when Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying capitulated to public opinion and withdrew the government's plans to impose mandatory implementation of the NEC. Schools would be able to decide whether to teach the curriculum independently (Lau and Nip 2012). Subsequent to its success, Scholarism has shifted its focus to campaign for democracy in Hong Kong. It has advocated for a civil nomination process by 2017 (in 2007 the National People's Congress Standing Committee in China pledged direct elections would be held for Hong Kong's Chief Executive by 2017) (The Standard 2013).

By analyzing how Scholarism used Facebook as a tool to attract public support and galvanize various groups to collectively protest against the government, we seek in this paper to advance social constructionist theory. We do so by offering a case study set in a region which differs from those usually examined in constructionist studies to date. The illiberal, post-colonial context of Hong Kong challenges what Western constructionists dub the "natural history" of social problems claims-making salient in Western, liberal democracies. Natural histories within constructionism aim to track a "temporal course of development in which different phases [of claims-making] can be distinguished" (Fuller and Myers 1941:322) in relation to a social problem. In other words, constructionists pay attention to the pathways traveled by claims about social problems—how they are taken up or rejected, become policy or boomerang back with unintended consequences.

The most recent iteration of a natural history model is offered by Best (2008:17), who suggests following social problems debates and outcomes based on the following sequence: claims-making, media coverage, public reaction, policymaking, social problems work, and policy outcomes. Best argues this process is not necessarily linear, but the model serves as a useful framework for understanding the processes involved in social problems debates. This model is salient in liberal democratic societies where, for instance, public reaction to social problems, when combined with claims-making underscoring fear (e.g., from the media, academics, government and non-governmental organizations), results in political responses "cashing in" on the

concerns of a voting electorate (Altheide 1997; Simon 2007). Yet in Hong Kong, where a small circle of officials make decisions regarding how to respond to social problems, public consultation and dialogue is perceived by many sectors of Hong Kong society to be chimerical (see: Ma 2007; Adorjan and Chui 2013; 2014). Those concerned with Hong Kong's resinicization feel that the government disregards its own public given the pressure from mainland Chinese authorities to maintain social order and economic harmony. For the government, this elitist style of governance stems from a lack of political legitimacy, with roots extending back before 1997. Aware of the watchful (and often disapproving) eye of Beijing, the Chief Executive is behooved to maintain order and performative stability (cf. Alagappa 1995). A full comparative analysis of how claims-making operates in Hong Kong is beyond our scope here. However, the case study of Scholarism suggests that it is politically active youth with access to social media that can garner a creative and efficacious mode of claims-making in an illiberal, undemocratic region.

Further Context and Methodology

Hong Kong is a highly advanced global financial center and "global city," with one of the world's highest rates of household Internet connection (67%) in the world (Chan and Fang 2007:245). Recent research reveals most youth in Hong Kong, as elsewhere, go online when searching for information or doing school work, and use the Internet most frequently for music and entertainment (Chan and Fang 2007:251-252). Yet Chu's (2010) survey of Hong Kong secondary school students, referring to

netizenship among youth, revealed “little support for popular claims that celebrate the active role of participants in the new media culture.” Although some infrequently posted to blogs or uploaded videos to YouTube, the students sampled remained “passive consumers in most cases” (Chu 2010).

We would suggest, however, that there is evidence of a groundswell of political activism among youth in Hong Kong, who make use of social media, not only to raise awareness of social problems, but to promote social movement activity that leads, in some cases, to mass protests mobilized against the government. Evidence of consumption of entertainment and fun online must not be considered as mutually exclusive to active netizenship and political participation. As Chu (2010) herself notes, “future research should aim at recruiting young people who do engage in [prosumption] for more contextualized perspectives.”

By the end of 2008, there were 3.65 million Internet users in Hong Kong; 68.7% of the total population of just over seven million (Hong Kong Internet Project 2009:3). The proportion of Internet users among those aged 18-30 increased from 70% in 2000 to 98% by 2008 (Hong Kong Internet Project 2009:6). In addition, across all sectors of society, students in Hong Kong had a near 100% penetration rate of Internet use between 2000 and 2008 (Hong Kong Internet Project 2009:11), suggesting that there may be very little by way of a digital divide in Internet access among adolescents in Hong Kong. While young people in Hong Kong communicate through a variety of ever-evolving social media (including Whatsapp instant messenger, Twitter, Instagram,

etc.), Facebook is one of the primary social network sites young “digital natives” (Prensky 2001) use to communicate with each other and with the broader society (Chu 2010).

Our interest in how politically active youth are challenging the post-colonial system and mainland Chinese authorities inspires our analysis of how student activist group Scholarism is able to achieve their goals for socio-political change. We focus on how Scholarism employed Facebook to mobilize public opinion and promoted an unprecedented reversal in proposed government policy. We do this through examining Scholarism’s Facebook “notes” postings from 2011 through 2013.

We collected three kinds of data (notes, statuses, and statistics) from Scholarism’s Facebook page: <https://zh-hk.facebook.com/Scholarism>. This paper centers on the content of translated notes, offering some descriptive statistical trends for further context. Notes created by the group were obtained from the link: <https://www.facebook.com/Scholarism/notes>. Notes offer a way to explore both the form and content of Scholarism’s organizational self-presentation. Notes from this hyperlink are posted by Scholarism itself, thus it is reasonable to assume the notes are posted intentionally by the group. A total of 99 notes were retrieved from 2011 (5 notes), 2012 (60 notes), and 2013 (34 notes) and translated into English. The notes also included illustrations and photos, although these were not analyzed for this paper.

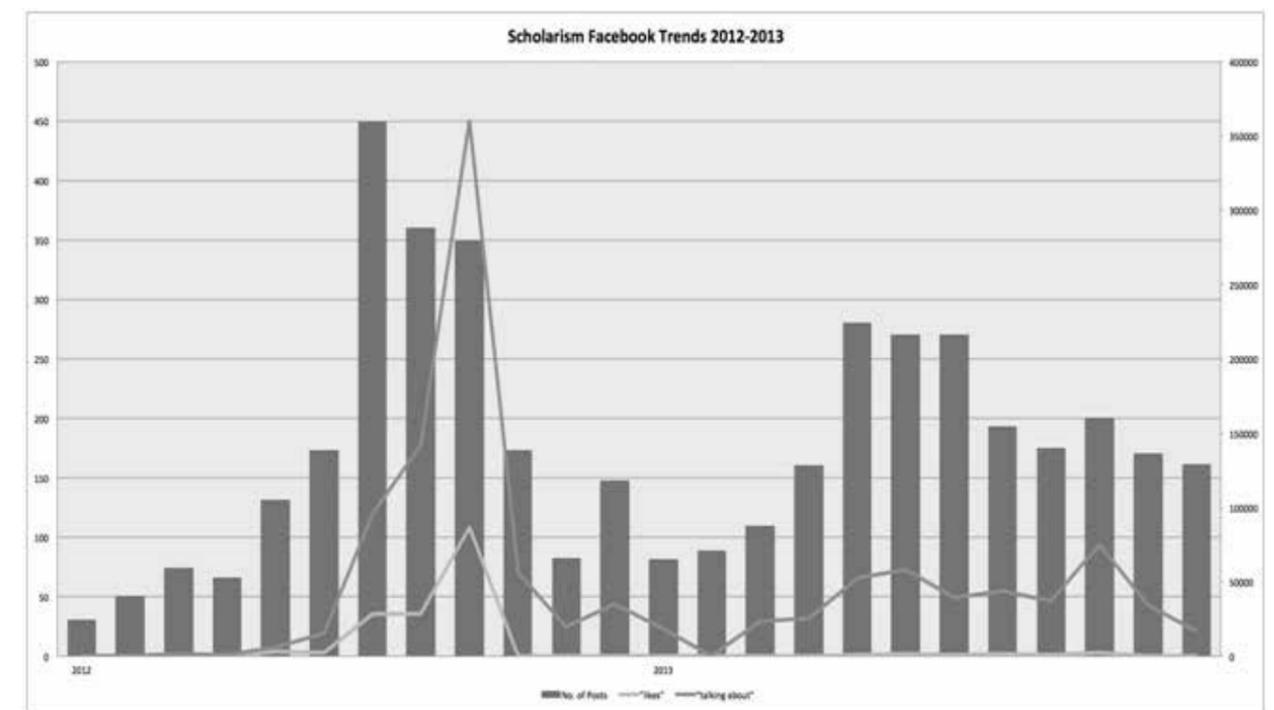
Statuses are identified as posts on the “timeline” feature of the social page. We selected “posted by page” to filter out posts by third parties on the

page and to ensure that the content analyzed was intended by the group. We then retrieved the individual links of the posts by clicking on the date of the post, followed by the production of statistical trends from the status links. All statuses from 2011-2013 were collected into a database of hyperlinks to 4315 posts. We then selected all 75 posts of 2011, and a comparable sample of 75/2084 posts from 2012 and 78/2157 from 2013 (every 28th post for 2012 and 2013). We analyzed the content of the immediate post (without further clicking other hyperlinks) according to a developed coding scheme. Statistics on “people who like this” and “people talking about this” generated by Facebook were also recorded. We also considered the content of

attached media without clicking into hyperlinks. Descriptive statistical trends were processed and compared across years. All information collected is publicly available; no confidential or private information was retrieved.

Overall trends indicate that the majority of posts occurred in 2012, especially in August and September, when the campaign against NEC was drawing the most momentum. Complementing this trend, it is clear that the majority of “likes” and “talking about” were concentrated during the same period. Interestingly, “talking about” metrics are substantially higher than the number of “likes.” This suggests that supporters are more inclined to disseminate

Figure 1. Scholarism: Facebook Trends.



Note: The scale for number of posts appears on the left; the scale for “likes” and “talking about” appears on the right.

Source: Self-elaboration.

information about Scholarism through Facebook rather than the shallower activism (or “clicktivism”) of just pressing the “like” button on Facebook. To generate a “like,” a user need only click the “like” button a single time. The “talking about” figure is related to the buzz or discussion generated by a particular page on Facebook. It includes “likes,” but also other forms of interaction and engagement, such as sharing content by posting it to a user’s Facebook wall. This implies that supporters of Scholarism are very active, not only browsing their Facebook page and retrieving information but also actively engaging and participating in social movements against the government.

Figure 1 shows aggregate trends regarding Scholarism’s Facebook page and supporter engagement. In the following section’s qualitative analysis of our sample of Facebook postings, we examine both the content of Scholarism’s messages to Hong Kong citizens and how Facebook was used to mobilize “real world” demonstrations, which had a great impact on governmental policy. We center on their efforts to reach out to citizens for support and to join in public demonstrations, and the shift to other wider, though related issues in 2013 (i.e., universal suffrage). By highlighting these themes, we show how Scholarism’s efforts helped inspire broad public support for social activism and challenge to Hong Kong’s post colonial government.

Facing the Government Through Facebook: Communicating With Citizens

Scholarism often takes aim at the lack of governmental public consultation and limited channels for dem-

ocratic expression in Hong Kong. They frequently accuse officials of posturing in their pronouncements of public consultation, and use Facebook to offer carefully crafted rejoinders. For instance, in October 2011, Chief Executive Donald Tsang announced, as quoted on Scholarism’s Facebook, “[w]e have carried out a public consultation on [Moral National Education]. The education community generally agrees with the idea and importance of introducing that subject.” Yet Scholarism criticized Tsang, stating:

[i]t seems that Tsang thinks that “public” does not include HK students and parents. In fact, the consultation held from May to August is merely a closed-door consultation, only a few teachers are allowed to attend the consultation meetings; student ... and parent organizations were not invited, neither are the public [informed] where those meetings were being held. While the largest stakeholders, students and parents, are not consulted, how can the government say that the public consultation has been carried? (Facebook, October 25, 2011)

Similar remarks are found in 2012, with Scholarism accusing the government of not consulting students, failing to publish revisions to the curriculum for public inspection, and failing “to allay public concerns about the brainwashing nature of the subject.” Asking secondary school boards to “implement programs or policies without consultation,” Scholarism writes, “is tantamount to contempt for public opinion and consultation mechanism. It is extremely disrespectful to civil society” (Facebook, February 27, 2012).

Having successfully organized demonstrations with the public in 2011, Scholarism then used Face-

book to actively resist officials’ attempts to negatively label them as troublemakers and naive students. In one post, Scholarism criticized Mr. Lau Lai-Keung, a member of a political advisory body in mainland China, for his criticisms of Scholarism’s demonstrations in late August 2011 as “being ‘senseless’”:

Mr. Lau pointed out that the demonstrators are a bunch of “young, mentally undeveloped” youngsters who don’t know the truth, and they are being incited. In fact, we are not being incited by others, all of our activities are organized by secondary school students, and we started to be aware of the issue of [Moral National Education] curriculum way before other political parties did, “being incited” is impossible. ... In terms of principle, Mr. Lau has a too limited view on the word “brainwashing” and it differs from our understanding. That’s why he did not understand our thoughts and actions, and saw us as deviants. (Facebook, September 07, 2011)

Such conscious resistance to efforts by officials to demean Scholarism invokes what Kitsuse (1980:9) termed “tertiary deviance,” referring to “the deviant’s confrontation, assessment, and rejection of the negative identity imbedded in secondary deviation, and the transformation of that identity into a positive and viable self-conception.” Kitsuse (1980:2-3, emphasis added) adds: “individuals who have been culturally defined and categorized, stigmatized, morally degraded, and socially segregated by institutionally sanctioned exclusions engage in the politics of producing social problems when they declare their presence openly and without apology to *claim the rights of citizenship*.”

While Scholarism may hope to communicate their rejoinders to key officials, it seems more probable that the primary audience they wish to capture is Hong Kong netizens. A frequent tactic is including a posting with a detailed and emotionally charged statement, followed by a number of itemized requests placed to the government, and closing with a call for public support. For instance, in response to a government-released consultation draft related to the NEC, Scholarism stated: “[w]e are of the opinion that this subject named ‘National Education’ is a disguised form of education to indoctrinate students with a form of twisted ‘patriotism.’ It insults the professionalism of teachers and academic integrity, with an intent to hinder students’ independent thinking ability” (Facebook, August 19, 2011). Three requests to the government are made at the end of the post: “1. Recall MNE Curriculum Consultation Paper”; “2. Introduce real human rights and civic education”; and concludes “at the same time, we urged HK citizens to participate.”

It is also evident through Scholarism’s Facebook posts that they do not expect all students who follow them to join in protests, which entail certain risks when clashes occur with police. In May 2012 (Facebook, May 21, 2012), Scholarism posted a transcript of an interview founder Joshua Wong conducted outside the Central Government Offices, regarding a recently organized protest. Wong, asked whether he thought schools would participate if students went on strike over the NEC, responded:

Thirty schools participate in the petition campaign on Facebook, which Scholarism initiated in April,

asking students to invite their fellow schoolmates to oppose brainwashing national education. This shows that many students are aware of this subject, but maybe they just need a channel. Also, parade [protest march] is not a familiar method of expression for students so Facebook is much simpler and easier for them.

This statement reveals Scholarism's cognizance regarding the power of social media to communicate with citizens—especially students—and recognizes that the majority of students in Hong Kong, while supportive, are not likely to join in direct clashes with police or hunger strikes. Nevertheless, Facebook provides a “channel” that students can use to collectively organize against governmental power. Maratea (2014:12), considering how the Internet affects the claims-making process for political activists, notes “even with an online networking structure in place, political claims-making campaigns are doomed to fail if activists are unable to acquire needed resources and mobilize supporters into action.” Facebook, in fact, provides Scholarism with the ideal platform to hail supporters, allowing Scholarism to focus resources on their offline mobilization efforts while garnering donations online.

By April 2012 (Facebook, April 23, 2012) Scholarism announced on Facebook its move into a “second wave of anti-brainwashing student movement,” detailing times and locations of “publicity street stations” in various districts. Scholarism writes that it “does not allow the government to treat any of the students as political puppets, and to suppress their freedom of thought!” Facebook posts began

to frequently call upon supporters to join in protests, with details of protest routes and times posted with additional links made available for further information. One post, for instance, encouraged supporters to surround the Liaison Office of the Central People's Government (Facebook, June 27, 2012). Also part of its “second wave,” Scholarism reached out explicitly to parents in a bid to garner support beyond students and teachers. They write on Facebook, alongside an appropriated *Simpson's* cartoon, that their campaign:

does not just concern students and teachers; parents and all the people of Hong Kong are important guardians of the next generation! We know that many parents have a common idea, but now parents' strength is scattered, so Scholarism wants to assist with setting up a Parents Concern Group on National Education so we can add further pressure on the government and demand it to withdraw the red education! (Facebook, July 08, 2012)

A link is provided for interested parents to join the Concern Group through a Google Docs form, requesting information on the school enrollment of their children and views on NEC.

Scholarism offers ample evidence of its deliberate intention to use Facebook in particular to garner public support and promote activism. One post, titled a “Declaration of Stance,” argues that their “stance is what we have shown in our Facebook pages' press releases and declarations. It is our *primary channel of information release*” (Facebook, July 25, 2012, emphasis added). Subsequent posts often end by reminding supporters to keep a vig-

ilant eye on their Facebook page for updates and details regarding public campaigns and planned protests.

By August, 2012, these strategies to collect public support were very successful. The pivotal protest and hunger strike that led to the government reverting its stance on NEC was originally publicized on Scholarism's Facebook page, with an announcement that the timetable of the Occupy the Government HQ protest would be posted to Facebook (Facebook, August 29, 2012). In a post subsequent to this Occupy protest, Scholarism notes “[t]he movement against National Education has grown from nameless to 120,000 people participating in the anti-National Education gathering. Many people are awake as a result, and understand the ambition of the [Communist Party of China]” (Facebook, December 19, 2012).

Shifting to Universal Suffrage

The victory of the summer 2012 led Scholarism to almost immediately post a justification for their continued vigilance and activities. Titled “Thanks for the support; The movement is not over; Get ready to build a new peak,” the post declared that Scholarism will continue to fight until the full recall of NEC (not just the retraction of its mandatory implementation). They state “[w]hat we have done has caused the government to fear the public opinion and so they have to come out and cool down the event. We hope that each HK citizen can keep supporting the protesting events of [Scholarism] and add more pressure on the government” (Facebook, September 09, 2012).

Scholarism then shifted to posts highlighting their concern that the government would tempt schools into voluntarily implementing the NEC through monetary incentives. Interestingly, one post documents how Scholarism was contacted by “some netizens” informing them that a particular school had apparently planned to implement the NEC voluntarily “without consultation with teachers, students, and parents.” Scholarism posted that it hoped the school's announcement “is merely a misunderstanding.” In fact, it was—the school issued a formal statement to Scholarism clarifying that it was not planning to implement the NEC. Scholarism concluded “[w]e urge netizens and citizens to keep monitoring the implementation of NEC in different schools. If they have discovered any brainwashing or biased element, they can seek help [through Scholarism]” (Facebook, December 17, 2012). This post reveals that Scholarism does not only inspire activism offline, through protests and demonstrations, but has engaged a body of netizens online, helping to act as watch dogs in the interests of advancing democracy and freedom in Hong Kong.

Our sample of Scholarism's Facebook posts demonstrates a clear shift away from NEC-related topics after 2012. 54 and 49 articles addressed NEC in 2011 and 2012 respectively, while only 7 in 2013 did so directly. The dominant issue Scholarism addressed in 2013 was universal suffrage (some articles also continued to address the mainland Chinese government crackdown of student activists in Tiananmen Square on June 04, 1989), especially given a planned “Occupy Central” movement for summer 2014, organized by local academics and supported by Scholarism.

This “turn” to universal suffrage was not a random grasping to remain politically relevant. Scholarism’s Facebook posts evidenced their concern with voters’ rights and democracy well before their 2012 NEC victory. Scholarism has always positioned itself as a group fighting for freedom and equality for all Hong Kong citizens, and NEC became a pivotal concern in 2012. Both the NEC and universal suffrage relate to concerns over the resinicization of Hong Kong. In fact, Facebook posts as early as March 2012 indicate an explicit concern with universal suffrage. In one posted statement in 2012, a poster with the caption “Refuse small-circle election, universal suffrage now” appears. Scholarism address students directly, inviting them to a University of Hong Kong website in order to participate in a Mock Civil Referendum in Schools and to “vote abstention” in order to communicate a no confidence in any candidates. They write:

[m]ost citizens and students do not have a right to vote, thus they are not allowed to select the leader of Hong Kong. CE [Chief Executive] candidates do not even disclose their stance, simply due to the loopholes of the election system [and] ... do not even need to face members of public, but they need the support from 1200-members from the Election Committee. Voices from the grassroots are often neglected. Thus, we oppose small-circle election, and believe that one-person-one-vote universal suffrage is the only way to make CE candidates respect voices and viewpoints from students, as well as to defend the public’s right. (Facebook, March 19, 2012)

In 2013, posts about universal suffrage are initially rendered with continued reference to the

campaign against NEC: “[t]he elements of political implantation will ... not disappear. After the [government] postponed the national education, Scholarism proposed the need to ‘change from defense to offense,’ preventing brainwashing material via striving for a democratic system” (Facebook, March 04, 2013). Subsequent posts refer to a “long-term war,” which “has started” and “would decide whether we can decide our own destiny” (Facebook, August 28, 2013). Democracy here is argued to be a more permanent corrective preventing corruption and ideological encroachment from emerging. Near the end of 2013, universal suffrage has become a central issue for Scholarism. In one typical post, they write:

Scholarism restates that we must insist on the principle of universal nomination and universal election. We do not want indirect citizen nomination nor closed discussion with the Liaison’s Office. We hope all those with similar objectives will insist on the bottom line together and not bow to political reality. Now is not a time to surrender; now is a time for all citizens to prepare for battle, welcoming the age of general election. (Facebook, December 21, 2013)

Scholarism remains on the forefront of the battle for universal suffrage in 2014. Their current proposal for full universal suffrage, which continues to be criticized by some (especially pro-Beijing officials) as against Hong Kong’s Basic Law, has received initial support by followers of the planned Occupy Central protest of summer 2014, designed to generate democratic elections as early as 2017 (Radio Television Hong Kong, May 06, 2014).

Discussion

Scholarism’s efforts set a new precedent for the form through which claims-making and social movements occur in Hong Kong. Always articulate and impassioned, Scholarism’s application of Facebook to mobilize citizens presents the *sine qua non* of claims-making under the illiberal post-colonial context of Hong Kong. Through Scholarism’s influence, the NEC became one of the most rapidly and widely denounced government proposals over the last decade. It is not the case that in Hong Kong “policy makers frequently heed public opinion polls” (Best 2008:170). The government often produces public opinion polls to canvas views on social problems, but these are widely perceived to be theatrical. While traditional modes of claims-making still occur in Hong Kong to express concern over social problems, netizens represent the vanguard of political purchase, drawing on the Internet to bring voice to those silenced under Hong Kong’s undemocratic channels. In doing so, Scholarism challenges the legitimacy of Hong Kong’s government, widely perceived to be more concerned over having Beijing’s approval than its own citizenry.

Scholarism’s success may be related to their acute cognizance of their position as “outsider claims-makers”—those who are outside of powerful social circles, and often engage in attention grabbing tactics, including organizing protests and demonstrations, to get the media’s attention about social problems (Best 2008:64). Loseke and Best (2003:40) draw attention to the inter-relation of claims-makers and audiences, arguing that claims-making is successful only so long as audi-

ence members support them. By using Facebook, Scholarism is able to connect with many other youth who also feel socially and politically disaffected, and eventually expanded their audience to include parents, teachers, and academics. Their case demonstrates that netizens in Hong Kong are engaging, not merely in a shallow form of “clicktivism,” but in an impactful process which may come to transform the broader socio-political context of post-colonial Hong Kong.

Constructionist scholars have only begun to analyze how claims-making is impacted by the Internet. Blogs, for instance, offer claims-makers a virtually unlimited carrying capacity: they permit readers to hyperlink to associated content including other web pages, videos, social network sites, fund-raising sources, online petitions, et cetera (Maratea 2008). Still, there are limitations for individual bloggers including the commitment of their time, resources to maintain a blog, and the often dense material potential supporters need to sift through (see: Maratea 2008:145, 148). Facebook offers even greater possibilities, especially for groups such as Scholarism who acquire financial support from followers and invest their resources mostly in organizing mass demonstrations rather than maintaining an online presence for their claims. Interestingly, while Scholarism does have a Twitter account, most Twitter posts offer links back to their Facebook page. Scholarism are adept at placing numerous hyperlinks in all their Facebook posts, often linking to YouTube videos capturing the mass demonstrations they organized (and, of course, these videos have numerous comments and links themselves). The power of netizenship

in Hong Kong is that it facilitates the promulgation of a “unified protest network of inter-linked web-sites” (Perez 2013:83), which seeks the unified goal of freedom.

The case is made in this special issue of *Qualitative Sociological Review* that social constructionism needs to push beyond case studies (see: Best [this issue]). We agree, though case studies based in non-Western regions are still worthwhile conducting for what they contribute to comparative constructionism and theoretical development. Numerous lines of research inquiry are available to promote a comparative social constructionism, especially in regions outside of the liberal democracies constructionists usually study. We need to know more, in the case of youth activism in Hong Kong, regarding claims-making in cyberspace, as well as in media

(including English and Chinese-language sources), governmental strategies and counterclaims in response, and the further exploration of what forms social problems natural histories take.

Other more general questions emerge. How should constructionists treat the concept of culture when conducting comparative research? Or, is culture too vague a context to help us situate and understand claims? How do we avoid problems of representation such as Orientalism (Said 1994), for instance, viewing claims-making outside Occidental regions from Western eyes? How does globalization affect localized claims-making in non-Western regions, and how does localized claims-making in these regions affect larger global patterns? Attention to further development of the right questions is crucial before developing further lines of research.

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