Forced Democratization in Social Movement
A Case Study of Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong
Chi Kwok and Ngai-Keung Chan

Introduction

Conventional views of legitimacy assume that the concept only applies to where a coercive relation exists. Social movement, which largely consists of voluntary participants, is therefore neither proper to talk about legitimacy nor to employ the concept of legitimacy for analyzing the internal dynamics of it. Moderate views conceive the legitimacy of a social movement comes from its purity of intention and possible gains to participants, instead of a democratic procedure. Using the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong, one of the key mass protests in 2014 as an example, this paper argues that failing to establish an effective democratic procedure in a movement would result in “forced democratization” of decision making power, a bottom-up challenge of the legitimacy of interest representation, which would easily cause a split and ideological contention between decision making and non-decision making groups. Through interviewing major leaders of various groups in the Umbrella Movement, this paper articulates the relation between democratic procedure, legitimacy, and social movement. This study aims to shed light on the factors that connect participants together and those that dissolve the connection.

In this paper, we will first discuss the significance of the concept of legitimacy as a tool in explaining a movement. Then we will discuss our method of conducting this research as well as the research context. After that we will go into our case, the Umbrella Movement, articulating how the concept of legitimacy had affected movement leaders’ decisions and what legitimating mechanism they attempted to build. Finally, we will provide an analysis of the case.

Legitimacy as the question

Most social movements are voluntary events: participants can quit whenever they want; no coercive relation is involved. Hence, an important concern for social movement leaders is to mobilize social movement bases through building up a general consensus within their own networks (Tilly & Tarrow, 2007). The projection of social movements as consensual politics has largely marginalized the problem of legitimacy in social movements (Haunss, 2007). As tons of movement organizations have put the word “consent” into their founding documents and guidelines, this might create an illusion that the issue of legitimacy has been settled before the beginning of any movements (Earl, 2007; Porta, 2009). Yet, scholars are not unaware of the importance of leadership legitimation – ways in which leaders become leaders. Leaders are
critical to movement; they perform significant tasks including articulating ideology, engaging the public, making strategic and tactical decisions, and so on (Earl, 2007; Morris & Staggenborg, 2004; Ganz, 2010). Social movements are sustained campaigns of claim making involving collective actions based on organizations, solidarity, networks, and cultures (McAdam, Tarrow & Tilly, 2001). As social movements are about effective collective actions challenging political power holders, a successful movement must be able to effectively coordinate its participants to perform actions that are required for the campaign. Effective coordination, to a large extent, depends on effective leadership, and effective leadership partly relies on the legitimacy of the leadership.

A dominant approach to understand leadership legitimation is the “Weberian” approach. Weber’s three conceptions of authority, including legal, traditional, and charismatic, are useful tools for the conceptualization of leadership legitimacy (Weber, 1968; Platt & Lilley, 1994; Morris & Staggenborn, 2004). Put briefly, this approach explains the legitimacy of a leader by her charismatic personality, purity, and credibility. Nonetheless, the drawback is that it cannot account for the proliferation of legitimating mechanisms in recent movements. Participants demand for mechanisms in which they should have a role in decision making not because there are no charismatic leaders, but because an increasing amount of people perceive social movements as collective actions resembling deliberative and participatory democracy. (Porta, 2009) Another approach, stressing also on the quality of the leader, emphasizes the leader’s capacity of creating hope and carrying necessary tasks for the success of the movement (Ganz, 2010). Apart from these agency approaches, Robert Michels’s work provides an organizational perspective elucidating the legitimation process. In short, large movements require large organizations; large organizations cannot avoid hierarchy; hierarchy requires people who are capable of performing needed tasks. The legitimacy of leaders comes from the organizational necessity, given that they are normally representing participants’ interests (Michels, 1962; Morris & Staggenborn, 2004). A growing amount of recent literature has stressed more on the “civic” side of social movements: social movements are conducted in the civil society – a sphere in which “private individuals and groups interact for common purposes” (Wapner, 1995, p. 313; Kaldor, 2003). The democratic nature of the civil society causes rising demands for respecting each participant in the decision-making process, and the result is that the consensus decision making model becomes increasingly prevalent in social movements. As Mansbridge (2003) argues, in the absence of other effective legitimate tools, the consensual model is the most advantageous coordinating mechanism for movement organizations. Some scholars have further pointed out that the political opportunity structure plays an important role
in the suitable type of leadership: the right combination of structure and leadership equals legitimacy (Tilly & Tarrow, 2003; Morris & Staggenborn, 2004). The invention and employment of social media have further complicated the legitimation issue since they tend to generate “decentralized”, “multi-centered”, or even “leaderless” movements.

Regardless the above mentioned legitimation processes, there is a relative neglect of the establishment and abandonment of different legitimating mechanisms within a movement. By legitimating mechanism, we mean the way in which leaders or leading organizations gain the authority over voluntary participants. Leaders or organizations can legitimize themselves through performing well, demonstrating their capacities, or even a democratic voting system. These are various kinds of legitimating mechanisms. James Q. Wilson (1974) succinctly depicts the difficulty of the legitimacy issue in voluntary associations:

In most voluntary associations, authority is uncertain and leadership is precarious. Because the association is voluntary, its chief officer has neither the effective power nor the acknowledged right to coerce the members—they are, after all, members and not employees. In a business firm, the chief officer may, within limits, hire and fire, promote or demote, his subordinates . . . In most associations, power, or the ability to get a subordinate to do what the superior wants, is limited, and authority, or the right to exercise such power as exists, is circumscribed and contingent. (p. 215)

This helps to clarify the reason why traditionally the concept of legitimacy applies only to formal politics—mainly state politics and not politics beyond the state, as politics beyond the state does not involve coercive relations. However, in reality, people do challenge the legitimacy of movement leaders, and movements, as collective actions, do involve negotiations of interests even within participants. Sometimes people feel that leaders hold organizational advantages that they lack, and hence they cannot perform their claims without those leaders. Yet, leaders might not sufficiently respond to their questions of decision, and sometimes leaders might even make decisions that are unfairly biased towards parts of the participants or to themselves (Michels, 1962). This is why people do in fact use the term legitimacy in real world movements, and this is also why the concept is suitable for the analysis of social movements.

Another important aspect that Wilson points out is that the leadership legitimacy in voluntary associations is uncertain and precarious. Leadership in movements, especially in large movements, is always uncertain and precarious since dynamics and conflicts are more complicated and unavoidable among participants. (Cheng & Chan, forthcoming) Different political identities often coexist in large scale movements.
Participants might agree upon the same goal while disagree with each other on the decision-making procedure. They might agree with each other on the same goal and procedure in a particular period of time but withdraw the agreement later. In other words, while a specific legitimating mechanism might be able to resolve the legitimacy problem at one time, it nevertheless would fail to achieve the same task in other periods when participants come to demand more than what the previous legitimating mechanism can offer. This legitimating requirement shift can sometimes affect leaders’ significant decisions, because a right legitimating mechanism is part of their mobilization power.

**Research Context**

The case analyzed below, the Umbrella Movement (UM) was the largest social movement in Hong Kong’s recent history. It lasted for 79 days (from 28 September to 15 December 2014). It was originally intended to be an occupation that took place in Central (and named as “Occupy Central Movement”), the key business area in Hong Kong, but grew into a three-site occupation movement (i.e. Admiralty, Causeway Bay and Mongkok), after the police fired 87 canisters of tear gas at the protesters (Tang, 2015). Due to the sudden change from “Occupy Central Movement” (OC) to the UM, a planned and centralized collective action to a more decentralized movement, a short term to long term occupation, three puzzles arose: (1) who represents whom? (2) how does this sudden change challenge the leadership legitimacy and its decisions? (3) what are the legitimating mechanisms adopted by the leadership coalition to respond to the legitimacy crisis and how did they affect the movement? To address these three questions, we will first examine the legitimating mechanisms in the OC, which was the former body of the UM. We will then map the conditions for the leadership legitimacy crisis arising in the UM, and how the UM leadership coalitions sought to resolve the challenges from the protesters.

Current studies on the UM fall into three main categories. The relationship between media (especially new media technologies) and social movement mobilization has drawn considerable attention in the first strand of literature (Lee, 2015a, 2016; Lee & Chan, 2016). These studies have demonstrated that digital media activities were positively related to the protesters’ involvement in the UM. The second strand of literature has considered the structural causes of the UM such as the Chinese government’s intensified intervention in Hong Kong (Cheng, 2016; Cheng & Yuen, 2015; Davis, 2015; Lui, 2015; Veg, 2015; Xiang, 2015). The third group of studies has generally concerned with the movement leaders’ (K. M. Chan, 2015; Wong, 2015a) and protesters’ participation in the movement (M. Chan, 2015; Cheng, forthcoming; Lee & Chan, 2016; Hui & Lau, 2015). The articles of Kin-man Chan
(2015) and Joshua Wong (2015) provide us a better understanding of the movement leadership’s thinking, while other studies help to make sense of the protesters’ background and action. Most studies and the public discourse often depict the UM as a “leaderless” movement owing to its personalized action slogans and the motto of “you don’t represent me”; however, movement leaders did exist (Cheng, 2016) and had shaped protesters’ participation (Lee & Chan, 2016). In this vein, the popularity of the personalized action slogans can be viewed as a way to reveal the tensions between protesters and leadership coalition formulated by HKFS, OCLP, and Scholarism. Against this background, we argue that a nuanced articulation of the legitimating mechanisms in the UM may improve our understanding of the crucial but neglected relationship between democratic procedure, legitimacy, and social movement.

**Method and Data**

To explore the leadership dynamics and relevant legitimating mechanisms in the Umbrella Movement, this study utilizes the semi-structured interviews with the major leaders of the Umbrella Movement, materials available on websites and Facebook pages of relevant organizations, and news coverage and commentary of the Umbrella Movement available on the electronic news archives Wise News. We conducted six in-depth, semi-structured interviews with the core activists from OCLP, The Hong Kong Federation of Students (HKFS), and civil society organizations in 2015 and 2016. These interviewees were responsible for different leadership works. Three of them were core members of the leadership coalition that took part in the decision-making process; another three were, to a certain extent, “bridging leaders” who connect the leadership coalition with ordinary protesters (Robnett, 1996); they carried bridging duties such as disseminating the leadership coalition’s messages to the protesters. Amongst these three “bridging leaders,” one was also responsible for coordinating pickets in the occupation site in Admiralty; another two undertook daily logistics support in the occupation sites. The interviewees were asked about their viewpoint on the movement, the struggles that they had faced, and the rationale of decisions that they had taken in the movement. Informed consent was used. Each interview lasted about 45 to 80 minutes. In addition, the analysis draws upon data from the websites and Facebook pages of *Occupy Central with Love and Peace* (OCLP), *Hong Kong Federation of Students* (HKFS) and Scholarism to map the context and conditions of legitimating mechanisms. Relevant news coverage and commentary were derived from keywords search (e.g., leadership in the Umbrella Movement). We utilize the news materials to identify the leadership coalitions’ major decisions and potential dynamics. Taken together, these
various data sources can triangulate the findings and provide a richer picture of the UM (Maxwell, 2013).

This study approached data collection and analysis as an iterative process rather than a linear way; that is, we moved continuously back and forth between gathering and analyzing the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Specifically, the on-going data analysis allowed us to follow up the emerging themes in subsequent interviews; therefore, this approach helps to constantly refine and reintegrate our theoretical and empirical inquiry. The following analysis aims to reformulate the conditions for leadership legitimacy crisis, and major legitimating mechanisms.

**Legitimizing Mechanisms in “Occupy Central Movement”**

To make sense of the legitimacy crisis in the Umbrella Movement, it is vital to discuss the original plan of OC. Unlike the Umbrella Movement, OC was a planned and centralized collective action. Legitimacy was a major concern in the OC:

We might not use the term (legitimacy) directly, but this must be one of the considerations. From the very beginning, we three issued the letter of faith, providing a blueprint of how we would organize the movement; these are all grand principles……. Nonetheless, when it comes to the details of the organization of occupation, we tried to make the decision-making process as transparent and as open as possible; we do not want the main organizers to be the sole decision makers. Legitimacy was the chief concern of such move: an open and transparent decision-making process tends to gain higher legitimacy … There are two dimensions of legitimacy. Internally it means how are we to justify our suggestions to participants; externally a legitimate decision can produce greater political power.

**[Table 1]**

Table 1 lists key events pertinent to OC. In 2013, Benny Tai, a law professor at the University of Hong Kong, first introduced the concept of civil disobedience to the general public (Tai, 16 January 2013). Later, he together with Kin Man Chan and Yiu-Ming Chu founded the movement organization, OCLP, to campaign this idea and the pertinent collective action. OCLP emphasized that the movement had to be a strictly non-violent and rational one in order to awake the political consciousness of the public and eventually to strive for real democracy and justice. This emphasis also corresponds to the long-standing political culture in Hong Kong (Lee & Chan, 2011). Legitimacy is of particular importance to promoting new protest tactics (Biggs, 2013). To this end, OCLP organized three “deliberation days” (D-Day 1, 2, & 3), two “civil referendums” and other campaigns to provide discursive resources to the public for spreading the idea of an occupy movement from 2013 to 2014 (Lee, 2015b). More
importantly, three D-Days and two “civil referendums” served as a way to legitimate the collective action by allowing the participants to discuss the stances and strategies of the movement. According to Benny Tai,

From D-Day 1, there were already a few hundreds people to discuss important issues concerning the OC. Core members of pan-democratic parties were already in there. In D-Day 2, various civil society groups joined the discussion and the main principles of the occupation were discussed. We then uploaded all the relevant documents online and made them available to the public. Then in D-Day 3, a democratic voting was conducted among participants; they had to choose three out of more than ten movement proposals, since it was not practical to put all too many proposals into a referendum. Having reached a consent among participants, the three proposals were then put into a referendum, in which the general public had the right to vote the one that he was most favored.

In a nutshell, OCLP wanted to establish “a transparent democratic procedure to legitimate the Occupy Central Movement” by allowing the public to access to the pertinent information and participate in making the key decisions (K. M. Chan, 2015; Personal Interview).

The legitimating mechanisms at this stage, however, were rather exclusive in OCLP’s orientation. Although OCLP allowed the public to access the details about the movement on its website, and the “civil referendums” were open, the first two deliberation days and the voting taking place in the D-Day 3 were only open to people who signed “the letter of intent.” The letter of intent was an agreement between OCLP and the intended participants; specifically, the intended participants had to agree three basic beliefs of OCLP and indicate the way that they decided to participate in the movement (OCLP, 2013). The level of inclusiveness, to a certain extent, was constrained by who can participate in deliberation. Indeed, OCLP did not intend to include all people in the movement; rather, OC was only for those who agreed on the visions and guidance of OCLP. According to Benny Tai,

We were launching a movement. If you agree with it, you can come and join, while if you disagree, you can remain outside. No one forced anybody to join it. OCLP expected to start the occupy movement in Central, the major business area, on 1 October 2014, and all participants should follow the Manual of Disobedience (see OCLP, 2014). The occupy movement was expected to only last for one day or few days of peaceful and voluntary arrest (Personal interview).

In addition, leadership legitimacy is partly related to the collaboration among social movement actors (Taylor, 2007). In the plan of OC, OCLP was the only leader, while civil society organizations (CSOs) and student organizations (i.e. HKFS and Scholarism) were mainly responsible for picketing and other duties in occupation sites.
In this stage, although there was a coordination committee for these organizations to discuss the general affairs concerning OC, OCLP was the final decision-maker (Personal interview). This top-down delegation, therefore, reduced potential inter-organizational conflicts.

In a nutshell, “deliberation days,” “civil referendums,” and top-down movement organizational structure were the major legitimating mechanisms to allow OCLP to lead the movement.

**Conditions for Leadership Legitimacy Crisis and Legitimating Mechanisms in the Umbrella Movement**

“The occurrence of the Umbrella Movement did not follow the script planned by Occupy Central with Love and Peace,” one of the interviewees said. Due to the student organizations’ more proactive imagination of civil disobedience (K. M. Chan, 2015; Wong, 2015a; Personal interview), the student organizations stormed the Civil Square outside the government headquarter in Admiralty on 26 September 2014. More than 60 protesters, including Alex Chow and Lester Shum of the Hong Kong Federation of Students (HKFS) and Joshua Wong of Scholarism were subsequently arrested. More than ten thousand people supported the protest surrounding Civil Square (Apple Daily, 27 September 2014a). It compelled the three OCLP leaders to declare the beginning of OC in the early morning of the 28 September, although OCLP claimed just right before that there was no plan to start OC in advance (Apple Daily, 27 September 2014b). The protest quickly transformed into a large-scale occupation in Admiralty, Mongkok and Causeway, and named as UM after the police fired 87 canisters of tear gas at the protesters (Tang, 2015).

The unprecedented developments in the period from 26 to 28 September not only transformed the social movement from something ephemeral to long-term unplanned occupation, but also shaped the public’s understanding of the movement leadership. As discussed, OCLP was perceived to be the only legitimate leader, and most participants were mobilized by their visions in the original plan of OC. Nonetheless, according to two different surveys conducted in the occupied sites at Admiralty, Causeway Bay and Mongkok in October 2014, most protesters were not mobilized by OCLP and did not regard OCLP as a legitimate leader (Cheng & Chan, forthcoming); they rather recognized the HKFS as a legitimate leader (Cheng & Chan, forthcoming) and were willing to comply with their instructions (Tang, 2014). In other words, OCLP’s authority to lead the movement was delegitimized. This de-legitimation also reflected when OCLP declared to begin OC on 28 September: some protesters criticized OCLP’s action as “hijacking” the movement “of the students”. The protesters’ discontent and criticism led to the first leadership legitimacy crisis in the
UM, followed by the protesters’ challenges, for example, to leadership coalition’s decisions and pickets’ authority. Without the aforementioned background, it is difficult to make sense of the rise of personalized action frame in the UM. In brief, the decisions made by leadership coalition were often challenged by the protesters. The movement leaders therefore were forced to response to these challenges. We identified four major mechanisms adopted by the UM leadership as an attempt to legitimate their decisions and movement.

Legitimating Mechanism 1: The establishment of the “Five-Party Platform”

The criticism of OCLP’s “hijacking” action and protesters’ recognition of HKFS and Scholarism posed a challenge to the top-down organizational structure. In response to the protesters’ discontent, the members of HKFS who were responsible for speaking to the public at the “big stage” decided to emphasize the values and visions of the movement as an attempt to re-consolidate the protesters (Personal interview). In contrast, OCLP viewed the announcement of OC as only a formal way to mobilize the OCLP’s resources such as pickets, volunteer teams and financial resources (Personal interview). Moreover, OCLP did not come up with any mechanisms to respond to the protesters’ anger at that moment (Personal interview). Finally, OCLP decided to give up the leadership, changing their role from organizing the movement to supporting the student organizations; specifically, OCLP became the actor to “manage the occupied sites and give suggestions to the students to make decisions” (Personal interview).

HKFS, Scholarism, OCLP, CSOs, and pan-democracy political parties formed the “Five-Party Platform” to coordinate the movement in October. Benny Tai narrated the rationale of establishing this platform as follows:

In the first few days, we (OCLP, CSOs, and pan-democracy political parties) made the best effort to accommodate the students’ decisions. However, sometimes student representatives had to go back and discuss with their standing committee members what we all had reached agreement in the Platform, and sometimes due to the disagreement of these committee members, we had to overthrow all that we had agreed, and re-launch the discussion again. This created a huge problem in our decision-making process. In the beginning, we definitely wanted to accommodate their “unanimous consent” procedure as much as possible, but after the first week, since most civil society groups had already entered the occupation, and pan-democratic political parties and legislators had also joined the Platform, students can no longer be the sole decision makers in the movement. We had to come up with a platform to coordinate decision making among different parties.
As shown in this excerpt, “Five-Party Platform” was an attempt to facilitate collaboration between different organizations. Some interviewees also regarded this platform as a way for different actors to express their views and communicate with each other. In theory, this platform might help to justify important decisions, at least in the leadership coalitions; however, it failed to function effectively as a decision-making mechanism. There are several reasons. First, this platform had no “binding power” (Personal interview); that is, participants did not have to follow the decisions made in this platform. This platform finally became a mechanism to gather different organizations to exchange information, coordinate logistics support, and inform their own decisions to each other, instead of coordinating consensus (Personal Interview; Wong, 2015b).

Moreover, some interviewees claimed that this platform could not help to establish mutual trust among different organizations because of their very different imaginations of the movement. For instance, OCLP stressed on the peaceful side of the protest, whereas HKFS and Scholarism had a more proactive imagination that might not strictly follow the guidance of Manual of Disobedience. Pan-democracy parties had to take the upcoming election into consideration. Furthermore, except OCLP and pan-democracy parties, other three parties (i.e. HKFS, Scholarism, and CSOs) did not have stable representatives in the platform (Personal interview).

In addition, the consensual model adopted by HKFS became a difficulty. Since HKFS was a student organization formed by the student unions of eight tertiary education institutions, its decision required the consensus among all student unions members. HKFS’s representatives in the “Five-party platform” thus could not make a final decision. This consensual model not only led to a more time-consuming leadership decision-making process, but also conflicts within the leadership coalition. Discussions of the “occupied area voting” were one of the examples. An interviewee from OCLP stated that the representative of HKFS originally had agreed to hold a referendum concerning whether to leave or remain in the occupation sites, but after he discussed with other HKFS members, HKFS finally turned down this proposal. In contrast, a core member of HKFS claimed that most of the members of HKFS knew the voting from media reports rather than from the representative. After HKFS members received a strong resistance from the protesters, they decided to withdraw the support for the referendum. Although there were at least two different versions of this decision, it is clear that the “Five-party platform” was not able to function effectively. It is also important to note that, according to one of the interviewees who participated in meetings of this platform, HKFS’s decision-making mechanism might not be the key factor leading to the failure of “Five-party platform” because of the participants’ diverse opinions. In other words, different parties already had their own
opinions regarding what ought to be done in the next step, and they had no concern in bargaining with other parties to reach a consensus.

Fourth, Alex Chow of HKFS (in a public seminar concerning with the UM on 3 September 2015) and some interviewees reflected that the leadership coalition should establish a general meeting for all protesters rather than the “Five-Party Platform.” Although this platform sometimes discussed the protesters’ opinions, these opinions were merely collected by different organizations. Participants had no chance to actually express their views in this leadership meeting. We will discuss how the leadership sought to gather the protesters’ opinion by organizing small groups discussions later. But in short, there was almost no protesters’ participation in decision-making process.

**Legitimating Mechanism 2: Occupied Area Voting**

We thought ourselves: how can we legitimize our decisions in the occupation sites? … Even the “Five-Party Platform” had no enough inclusiveness and legitimacy… Then we came to the thought that a referendum might be the best solution. That is, all the participants can come back to the occupation sites and actually vote for a decision that they do indeed favor. Why not online voting? Since it is harder to differentiate supporters of the movement and non-supporters of the movement in online voting; but if you require people to come to the occupation sites to vote, at least those people are more likely to be supporters …

The referendum was designed to solve the problem of legitimacy. The above interview excerpt exemplifies the premise of organizing the “occupied area voting.” In short, the “occupied area referendum” was intended to provide a democratic procedure to decide the stances and strategies of the movement as well as to legitimize the UM (Personal interview). On 24 October, the leadership coalition announced to hold the voting at the occupied site at Admiralty on 26 October to let the UM supporters to express their views on the government’s response to the movement (Table 2). This mechanism, however, received a strong resistance from some of the protesters. The protesters disagreed with the motions, criticized the “Admiralty-orientated” voting, and worried that it might provide a chance for oppositional groups to hijack the movement, as no arrangement could effectively distinguish real participants from those pretending to be participants. From the protesters’ perspective, the voting, after all, was only a way to provide legitimate excuses for the leadership to end this movement. In response to the protesters’ discontent, leadership coalition decided to revise the wordings of the motions, enlarge the voting places to include all the occupied sites, extend the voting period, and
promise that this voting was not a way to end the UM. The revised voting, however, fails to sufficiently address the protesters’ concern. On 26 October 2014, the “Five-Party platform” decided to cancel the voting.

As discussed previously, negotiation process about occupied area voting was one of the major conflicts among OCLP and student organizations. Although leadership coalition claimed that this voting was not proposed to end the movement, most interviewees agreed that the result of voting would finally become a “withdrawal mechanism.” OCLP and pan-democracy parties viewed a “withdrawal mechanism was a necessity in occupy movement”, whereas HKFS had a more proactive vision to continue the movement (Personal interview).

It therefore leads to a prominent but often omitted question arose in large-scale social movements: who are the people? According to a core member in OCLP: They (oppositional groups to the referendum) did not want to delegate the power of decision back to the participants. If there were a referendum, it would necessarily give rise to the question of whether to leave or not. If there were a democratic voting procedure, every participant can have a right to decide upon if the occupation is to be remained or not. From the perspective of the participants, it was not us, as main organizers of the movement, to make the decision of whether to continue the occupation. It was reasonable for them to question our legitimacy to make such a huge decision. And, more importantly, the voting was not binding to these oppositional groups; after all, who had the power to remove them from the sites if they insisted to stay there? When you think twice about the problem of legitimacy, this movement did not only belong to those who actually “occupied” the sites; it also belonged to those who did not stay in the sites but constantly provided resources for the movement, and not to mention those who came every night and leaved until the last train.

This interview excerpt shows that OCLP might want to incorporate all UM supporters into decision-making process. Notably, as this interviewee stated, not all OCLP members supported the voting. In contrast, HKFS might consider protesters to be the only members who can participate in the decision-making process. Since HKFS found that many protesters disagreed with the voting, it decided to turn down the proposal. Some HKFS members considered the voting as an ineffective withdrawal mechanism: If the voting were to put the question of whether to remain or leave to all supporters of the movement, this can in no way solve the issue. Assuming the result is that people had voted to leave, what if some of the participants are willing to comply with the result while others do not? Of course, those who voted to leave and willing to comply with the result could definitely leave, but who are
going to take care of those who decided to remain? Sometimes, a democratic procedure might not be the best solution to a controversy.

The failure of organizing the voting finally led to a more intensified opinion split within the leadership coalition. This event also reveals that the movement leaders were not able to mobilize the protesters; rather, the legitimacy of their decision was under the participants’ constant challenge. One of the potential reasons is that the leadership coalition did not consult the protesters’ opinion prior to making a decision. Meanwhile, given that a democratic procedure such as deliberation and voting was an undesirable practice within the community of UM protesters, a puzzling tale arose: is it possible for leaders to gather the protesters’ views and make a legitimate decision?

*Legitimating Mechanism 3: Opening the “Big Stage” and On-site small group discussions*

[Table 3]

The third legitimating mechanism was to allow the protesters to publicly express their views. To this end, leadership coalition had opened the “Big Stage” to the protesters and organized small group discussions in the occupied sites. Table 4 lists the major events concerning the protesters’ challenges to the so-called “Big Stage.” The “Big Stage”, a large stage built on a high tower, refers to a stage set up by the leadership coalition to disseminate the important information at Admiralty. Later, especially for radical groups within the movement, this became a symbol of an unjustified authority in the movement, and this became a place where radical protesters spread their anti-leadership messages.

Although the first explicit challenge to the “Big Stage” was on 8 November at the occupied site of Admiralty, the criticism towards the “Big Stage” had occurred in Mongkok since October. Indeed, there were more calls for decentralizing the movement in the Mongkok occupation site than the two others. This group of protesters constantly challenged the legitimacy of the leadership throughout the UM by the slogan: “you [the leaders] don’t represent me.” In contrast, it was commonly understood that protesters in Admiralty were more likely to comply with the leadership. Apparently this was a stereotype that did not fully capture every nuance of the movement. One of the interviewees, who was a picket in the UM, told that the authority of the pickets were greatly challenged by protesters since October even in Admiralty. Even though OCLP and HKFS sought to endorse the pickets, the latter still could not effectively manage the occupation sites, especially after the event on 8 November: A protester claimed that pickets and helpers of the “Big Stage” did not allow him to speak on the “Big Stage” and considered his action as “threatening the leadership radically.” Although Joshua Wong soon made it clear that student leaders
welcomed transparent dialogues, the discontent over the “Big Stage” was deeply rooted in radicalized protesters’ communities. Facing this challenge, the leadership decided to open the “Big Stage” for protesters to public express their views. The following interview excerpt may exemplify the rationale of this decision:

At least when we put this idea into implementation, our reference point was the “Sun Flower Movement Forum” (大腸花論壇). You have to provide an opportunity for them to release their emotion, since we had observed that protestors had already questioned the legitimacy of the leadership. Secondly, some of them might have problem with the legitimacy of the leadership, but their main dissatisfaction was that there way no way for them to publicly express their anger and thoughts. Opening the “Big Stage” can be an effective way to resolve this dissatisfaction. If we did not open the “Big Stage”, and their anger cannot be released, eventually they might completely overthrow the leadership. Therefore, rendering a platform for angry protestors to publicly announce their messages was the best way to maintain the leadership … For instance, in one night when some angry protestors attempted to demolish the “Big Stage”, a few hundreds of them went to the “Main Stage” [a stage that was next to the “Big Stage”] to launch a forum. This had transformed an extreme tension into a moderate deliberative atmosphere. This accident inspired our decision to open the “Big Stage”, as we thought that this would be useful to alleviate the anger of protestors.

Opening the “Big Stage” created a channel to relieve protesters’ anger towards the leadership’s decisions: protesters might have a perception that leaders have received and will consider their opinions. Nonetheless, it also allowed protestors to criticize the representativeness of the leaders. The event on 1 December was an example. Kam-mun Cheng, who represented the radical protesters’ community, severely criticized HKFS’s decision about storming the Central Government Complex through the “Big Stage”, and consequently this triggered many discussions in social media which ultimately contributed to an atmosphere of distrust between UM leaders and radical communities.

In addition to the “Big Stage,” HKFS and OCLP also organized “small group discussions” in the occupied sites since October. One of the major reasons, as discussed by the interviewees, was to show that the leadership still existed, that the movement was not “leaderless”:

The three organizers of OCLP must stay in the occupation sites … They had to be seen by the participants; just like Alex Chow and Lester Shum must be seen in the Mongkok site … Since mid-October HKFS had established a station to demonstrate that they were in the occupation site.
Seemingly, the presence of symbolic leaders (e.g., the three leaders from OCLP and Alex Chow and Lester Shum of HKFS) in occupied sites was a way to connect the leadership and protesters. Another major reason, similar to the rationale of allowing protesters to speak in the “Big Stage,” was to let protesters to express their views and anger directly to the leaders. At the same time, the leadership could understand protesters’ opinions better (Personal interview).

The leadership, however, did not really take protesters’ views expressed in the “Big Stage” and small group discussions into the decision-making process. Many interviewees claimed that the leadership was already understood the protesters’ viewpoint quite well, so there was no necessity to actually build up a bridging mechanism to include participants into the decision-making process. More than that, the leadership coalition contained various parties which had no common imagination of the movement; the legitimacy challenge on the one hand further sharpened ideological conflicts among leaders since what most of them were thinking was how to consolidate the support of their basis. On the other hand, they tended to work separately to fulfill their own supporters’ demands instead of trying to reach consensus within the coalition. The lack of bridging mechanism between decision making and non-decision making groups resulted in the inability of the leadership as a whole to efficiently react to protestors’ discontent, which further led to a new discourse that the leaders did not represent the protestors, as they had a different agenda than what most people wanted.

**Legitimating Mechanism 4: Lego members’ resignation and referendum**

After the announcement of the occupied area voting, HKFS proposed a de facto referendum by asking five Lego members from pan-democracy camp to resign (see Table 3). Since when they have resigned, according to the current legal requirements, the government has to launch a re-election asking people to elect new legislators. And if pan-democratic candidates still win the election, it can be seen as an indirect endorsement to the theme and method that the leadership was putting into practice in the UM. More importantly, the leadership can then claim that they carry the democratic authorization, which would hugely strengthen their legitimacy as leaders of the movement. Joshua Wong of Scholarism also supported this proposal. Nonetheless, pan-democracy parties such as the Democratic Party and Civil Party worried about the effectiveness of the “referendum” and worried that it might provide a chance for pro-Beijing camp to pass the electoral reform package which was disagreed by the protesters, since if pan-democratic candidates fail to be re-elected, the pro-establishment side would have enough seats in the legislature to pass the
electoral reform bill, and the pan-democratic side will lose their veto power. Though organizers failed to put this into practice during the UM, in January 2015, just a month after the UM, Albert Ho Chun-Yan, a pan-democracy Lego member, attempted to create a true referendum through his resignation, since he believed that the de facto referendum might help to organize a new wave of protest against Beijing’s electoral reform mandate, but this time both HKFS and scholarism were unconcerned about the plan, and announced that they would not participate in it, which led Ho gave up his idea. For the sake of discussion, this paper only discusses the pertinent debates within the leadership coalition.

Similar to the voting, political actors within the leadership coalition divided into two groups because of the controversy over the retreat mechanism: since the occupation had lasted for about three months, and hence resources supply and the morale of the occupants were at stake, many thought that there must be a proper way of retreating from the occupation sites. The major concern of OCLP and pan-democracy parties was whether the de facto referendum could be an effective withdrawal mechanism. In contrast, student organizations considered the referendum as a way to sustain the movement. In the interviews, we were told that Albert Ho agreed to resign during the UM; however, since the student leaders did not agree to use the referendum to end the movement, the proposal were finally turned down. The last attempt of democratizing the decision-making process had failed too.

**Conclusion**

The Umbrella Movement was the largest and lengthiest social movement in the history of Hong Kong, and its impacts are still lasting in today’s Hong Kong. The chief concern of this paper is how the problem of legitimacy had affected the movement as a whole. From the depiction of the four different legitimating mechanisms evolving over time, we observed a “forced democratization” in the decision-making process. When protestors began to have different visions of the movement other than the leaders’ one, it was as if they had withdrew their consent to the leadership, and leaders had to find a way to resolve this legitimacy crisis. Often times the solution was making the decision-making more transparent and inclusive.

From the very beginning the organizers of OCLP had anticipated this problem and made the OCLP extremely democratic in every stage of the decision making process, but then the sudden change from the OCLP to the UM had interrupted this mechanism. The first attempt to re-establish a legitimating mechanism was to create an effective coordinating platform among all major leaders, hoping that different representatives would bring in different views, and the decision would then be a representative one – one which had considered diverse interests and perspectives.
Nonetheless, the constraints of HKFS’s internal legitimating mechanism, that is, the unanimous consent requirement among committee members, and the distrustful relationship between parties had resulted in the ineffectiveness of this legitimating mechanism. Later on the on-site voting was a democratic attempt to put the decision back to participants’ hands, and the major concern of this practice was to consolidate the representativeness and legitimacy of the leadership, but then the disagreement within leaders had also nullified the effort. At this point the radical communities were no longer satisfied with the previous legitimating mechanisms, and they came to challenge the authority of the pickets as well as the leaders. The leaders therefore felt obligated to open the “Big Stage” for protestors to publicly express their concerns in order to create a pro-deliberation environment, hoping that this could help alleviating their anger and rendering participants a feeling that the “Big Stage” would effectively incorporate their opinions into the decision-making process. Unfortunately, opening the “Big Stage” backfired; the platform became a place where radical communities could spread anti-leadership messages to participants. The final attempt to legitimize the movement by triggering off a real referendum regarding the future of the movement among all citizens through pan-democratic legislators’ resignation had also failed due to the reason that leaders had separated into two sides and had a complete conflicting vision of the function of the referendum – OCLP and pan-democratic wanted to utilize it to establish a legitimate retreat proposal, whereas HKFS and Scholarism tended to employ it to provide a legitimate reason to continue the occupation.

Over the UM, the attention had been shifted from the strike against the government to the internal conflicts between participants and leaders concerning the issue of legitimacy. The concern over legitimacy had caused the leadership to make various proposals in order to regain the support from participants. Nonetheless, different leaders in the coalition had different supporting bases. Instead of trying to reach an agreement, their insistence on the stance of their supporters’ opinions as well as their interests had invalidated the negotiation process, and hence no democratic procedure had been successfully instituted in the occupation sites, which in turn led to the growing dissatisfaction of radical protestors. The failure to build up a bridging mechanism to resolve the legitimacy problem had intensified the relationship between leaders and participants, and the disagreement on the method to regain the leadership legitimacy had worsened the relationship among leaders.

All in all, the UM illustrated that the problem of legitimacy can affect how a large scale movement is to be organized; it could also affect the relationship between leaders and participants as well as among leaders, and these are all crucial to the prospect of the movement. The UM also made it clear that there is no one-off
legitimating mechanism. Initially the opening “Big Stage” had successfully alleviated the legitimacy crisis but then it soon backfired. This demonstrated that the functioning of a legitimating mechanism depends largely on what the context requires – what the participants demand from the leaders.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>16 January 2013</td>
<td>Benny Tai published the news article on <em>Hong Kong Economic Journal</em> to propose the idea of “Occupy Central.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>27 March 2013</td>
<td>Benny Tai, Kin-man Chan, and Yiu-ming Chu officially launched “Occupy Central Movement” and delivered the Manifesto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 June 2013</td>
<td>OCLP organized the first “deliberation day” (D-Day 1) at HKU to discuss the potential problems and issues pertinent to “Occupy Central.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>October 2013 to</td>
<td>OCLP organized a series of small group sessions (part of D-Day 2).</td>
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<tr>
<td>February 2014</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1 January 2014</td>
<td>OCLP held “New Year Civil Referendum” via the “Popvote” website and app (Total number of voters: 62,169) [Open for all HK permanent identity card holder at the age of 18 or above]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 to 23 February 2014</td>
<td>OCLP held an e-voting for people who signed the letter of intent to evaluate the Chief Executive nomination and election mechanism.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3 March 2014</td>
<td>OCLP organized D-Day 2 (a plenary session) at CUHK to invite people who signed the letter of intent to participate in.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 May 2014</td>
<td>OCLP organized D-Day 3 at six different sites in HK. After the discussion, people who signed the letter of intent could vote three of fifteen proposals from the civil society organizations on the design of CE electoral system. (Total number of voters: 2,565)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 to 29 June 2014</td>
<td>OCLP held “Civil Referendum” to put forward specific proposals, principles and stance to HKSAR Government regarding the Chief Executive election in 2017 and “obtain the authorization of Hong Kong citizens.” (Total number of voters: 792,808) [Open for all HK permanent identity card holder at the age of 18 or above]:</td>
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<tr>
<td>22 to 26 September 2014</td>
<td>HKFS and Scholarism organized a week of class boycotts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 September 2014</td>
<td>OCLP released <em>Manual of Disobedience</em> and</td>
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</table>
announced that a large number of professional and other resources were ready of occupy movement. “Occupy Central” was reportedly started on 1 October.

26 to 27 September 2014 HKFS and Scholarism occupied Civic Square at night on 26 September. Alex Chow and Lester Shum of HKFS and Joshua Wong of Scholarism were arrested on 27 September. OCLP announced that “Occupy Central” would not start in advance.

28 September 2014 OCLP formally announced the start of “Occupy Central” at 1:40am.

Table 1. Major events pertinent to the “Occupy Central Movement” (Source: OCLP websites)
“Five-Party Platform” announced to hold an “occupied area voting” on 26 October to let the UM supporters to express their views about the two proposals made by government.

“Five-Party Platform” changed the wording of the two motions to be more progressive; and enlarged the voting places to include Admiralty, Mongkok, and Causeway Bay occupied areas. They also extended the voting dates to include 26 and 27 October.

● **Voter requirement:** Voters must confirm they understand the contents of the two motions and support the Umbrella Movement

“Five-Party Platform” announced to stop the “occupied area voting.”

<table>
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<tr>
<td>24 October 2014</td>
<td>“Five-Party Platform” announced to hold an “occupied area voting” on 26 October to let the UM supporters to express their views about the two proposals made by government.</td>
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<tr>
<td>25 October 2014</td>
<td>“Five-Party Platform” changed the wording of the two motions to be more progressive; and enlarged the voting places to include Admiralty, Mongkok, and Causeway Bay occupied areas. They also extended the voting dates to include 26 and 27 October.</td>
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<tr>
<td>26 October 2014</td>
<td>“Five-Party Platform” announced to stop the “occupied area voting.”</td>
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Table 2. Major events pertinent to the “Occupied Site Voting” (Source: News coverage on *Apple Daily* and *Mingpao* and OCLP’s website)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8 November 2014</td>
<td>A protester claimed that the “Big stage” (including the chief of picket, Kwok) did not allow him to express his view publicly.</td>
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<tr>
<td>9 November 2014</td>
<td>The “Big stage” in Admiralty was open for protesters to express their views publicly.</td>
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<tr>
<td>18 November 2014</td>
<td>A group of protesters organized a more radical protest to occupy the Lego building; however, some of them claimed the “Big Stage” did not allow them to do so.</td>
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<tr>
<td>21 November 2014</td>
<td>About one hundred protesters denounced the student leaders and OCLP, and called for disbanding the pickets.</td>
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<tr>
<td>24 November 2014</td>
<td>Some protesters criticized the pickets in Admiralty.</td>
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<tr>
<td>30 November 2014</td>
<td>HKFS organized a more radical protest as an attempt to occupy Central Government Complex.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 December 2014</td>
<td>Kam-mun Cheng asked HKFS and Scholarism to have an open dialogue with him. The staff of “big-stage” sought to stop his speech, thus leading to the conflicts among the protesters.</td>
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Table 3. Major events pertinent to the “Big Stage” (Source: News coverage on *Apple Daily* and Scholarism’s Facebook page)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>25 October 2014</td>
<td>HKFS proposed to ask five Lego members to resign in order to initiate the “Five-Districts Referendum.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>31 October 2014</td>
<td>“Five-Party Platform” claimed to discuss whether the referendum is a way to undertake the UM.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3 November 2014</td>
<td>Joshua Wong wrote an article to call for the referendum.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6 November 2014</td>
<td>Democratic Party and Civic Party concerned about the effectiveness of “Five-Districts Referendum.”</td>
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</table>

Table 4. Major events pertinent to the Lego members’ resignation and referendum  
(Source: News coverage on *Apple Daily* and *Mingpao*)
References


