

## **Why Stay? How young protesters see their future in Hong Kong**

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### **Introduction**

Following the 2019 social unrest, youth experienced disfranchisement in civic participation under a new circumstance as the city introduced its first national security law. While laws that govern national security are not uncommon in many places globally, such as the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia (HKSAR, 2024), such type of laws are unprecedented in Hong Kong. Since the handover of the city from the United Kingdom to China in 1997, the Hong Kong government has attempted to legislate laws relevant to national security under the framework of Article 23 in the city's mini-constitution, the Basic Law. The legislation was opposed by many of the Hong Kong people, with hundreds of thousands of people protesting in fear that their freedom would become limited in the name of national security. This event underlined the deep-seated insecurity of Hong Kong people towards the Beijing central government, as well as demonstrated Hong Kong people's low confidence in mainland China (Mathews, Ma, and Lui, 2008). This event resulted in the stepping down of the responsible bureaucrat, Regina Ip, and led to the government shelving the effort to legislate on national security until the 2019 Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Protest (Anti-ELAB protest), after which the National Security Law was imposed.

The effect of legislating the national security law has been tremendous on several levels. First, it is the first time the central government exercised its right to extend the coverage of a national law to its special administrative region, bypassing the local legislation procedures. This cast doubts among international spectators on the validity of the One Country, Two Systems (1C2S) model which unpinned the exceptionalism of an autonomous capitalistic society, Hong Kong, in a socialist country: China (HKFP, 2020). Second, Hong Kong people, especially the pan-democrats at the time, were made aware of their legal responsibilities to

uphold their responsibilities as Chinese citizens. They needed to demonstrate their patriotism when expected, such as in flag-raising ceremonies, daily teaching, and public speech. Failure to demonstrate or challenge these responsibilities may have serious repercussions because of the National Security Law. Having been brought up in an intentionally apolitical curriculum, the younger generation in Hong Kong gravitated towards cosmopolitan values. They have a stronger global citizen identity and less of a Chinese identity; the notion of National Security is foreign to them. The abrupt end to the Anti-ELAB protest has resulted in low civic engagement (discussing social issues) as well as low direct participation (voting and running for office). This was shown in the low voting turnout of this age group in the last election to the city's parliament, the legislative council, in 2021 as compared to previous elections (Chau, 2022).

Academic literature has focused on the development of the Anti-ELAB protest and the experiences of participants and stakeholders from different perspectives. For example, Mathews' (2020) brief anthropological report discussed the sense of national identity among youth, underpinning the ongoing rhetoric on Hong Kong people's problematic sense of belonging to China; Cheung's (2020) chapter in a research handbook on nationalism rived into the history of the development of Hong Kong nationalism, a form of localism which is now considered as a separatist movement by the Hong Kong government. Lam's (2018) ethnographic study provided foundational quantitative data on Hong Kong youths' mentality toward politics, and how it had manifested in various types of civic participation before the protests; Ku's (2020) article complemented Lam's findings.

While the topic of the Anti-ELAB protests has been widely studied and analyzed, this paper contributes to qualitative studies on understanding and comprehending youths' perspectives. I hope my own experience will also provide an alternative perspective to look into the Anti-ELAB protest; not only was I born and raised in Hong Kong, but my university,

the Chinese University of Hong Kong, was one of the major sites of the Anti-ELAB protest and social unrest. I have witnessed the transformation of my peers and their reactions towards the development of the situation, and my experience from close observation on the front lines of conflicts between the protesters and the police is also critical to my understanding of the participants' experiences.

Through this study, I seek to explain the condition of youth who participated in the Anti-ELAB protest in Hong Kong and their views towards the future of Hong Kong. This research hopes to gather insights to better assist the needs of youth in order to thrive in the new political and social environment in Hong Kong. It is essential for the Hong Kong government to rebuild its relationship with young people to ensure social harmony and most importantly, an adequate supply of human capital for its long-term development. While countries such as the United Kingdom and Canada are offering immigration programs to Hong Kong youth, the government must pay closer attention to the needs of our youth, and respond to these pain points head-on, so that we can regain their trust and compete with the countries that are seeking our youth talents.

## **Methodology**

This study has employed qualitative methodology by making use of semi-structured in-depth ethnographic interviews. I have interviewed 10 youths between 20-30 years old, either university students or fresh graduates with a few years of working experience. I opted to make use of purposive sampling techniques in selecting participants for my study, as research involving the 2019 Anti-ELAB protest could be sensitive for the participants involved. Without a strong interpersonal relationship, it is difficult to gather the trust of participants to share their intimate experiences of participating in the protests. Some of my participants were on the front lines of some major conflicts in the Anti-ELAB protest with direct participation in some of the

radical tactics, while other participants were simply participating in the demonstrations. In order to protect their privacy, I have made some necessary alterations to their accounts to prevent any legal danger to my participants.

Two stages of interviews were conducted. The first set of interviews was conducted around September to November 2022, and the second set was conducted from January to March 2022; the two sets of interviews share common participants with some new participants recruited during the second set. Having two sets of interviews was partly due to the fact that I did not make any recordings during the first set of interviews, as I felt the recording of discussions on the sensitive issues of anti-ELAB protests could cause discomfort to my participants. However, I realized through the actual interviews and analyzing my field notes that much of the conversation had been lost in the transcription process from spoken words to field notes. Therefore, I decided to weigh against the potential effects on my participants and recorded the second set of interviews. The two sets of interviews greatly strengthened the bonds with my participants; they tended to share more details in their second interview as they were more comfortable. The second set of interviews also helped to verify and confirm some information I gathered during the first set of interviews.

As I was conducting my fieldwork, I made sure that my participants knew that I was working on this study. I received their consent before I recorded the conversations with my participants, and they were also made aware of their rights to refrain from answering any questions they felt uncomfortable about.

## **Background**

It is important to understand the condition of Hong Kong youth and their state of mind when evaluating their cause of action. The irony of the protest is that, even though the vast majority of youth expressed their dissatisfaction with the situation in Hong Kong through their participation in the protest, most still had decided to stay in the city when options to immigrate were given to them. In this section, I discuss the youth's changing views and degrees of participation in Hong Kong's political process since 2014 leading up to the 2019 anti-ELAB protests.

## **Youths' Reaction to the 831 Decision**

The prevalent participation of youth in the 2019 Anti-ELAB protests is no coincidence; this was foreshadowed by the rise of localism following the failure of the traditional democratic parties to deliver a democratic transformation in Hong Kong, one that was promised when Hong Kong was handed back to China in 1997 (Cheung, 2020). This became the underlying context that led to the Occupy Central event, also known as the Umbrella Movement (UM).

The Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (PRC Congress), a permanent legislative body of the People's Republic of China, announced on 31 August 2014, the plan for the long-awaited political reform in Hong Kong. The plan, commonly referred to as the 831 Decision by the protesters in the UM, outlined the procedures required for a public election of the city's Chief Executive. The 831 Decision was criticized and deemed as undemocratic because for a person to become a candidate in the election, one must be nominated by a majority of the electoral committee, most of whose members were selected by undemocratic means (BBC, 2014). Should a candidate not befit the expectations of the Chinese central government, the electoral committee could act as a proxy to screen out the interested individual from being a candidate. The opposition to the 831 Decision triggered a series of

events that led to the UM, which aimed to force the PRC congress to retract the 831 Decision by paralyzing the administrative and legislative operation of the Hong Kong government.

Youth participation was instrumental in the UM; student groups including Secondary and University Student Unions reacted to the 831 Decision swiftly by organising school strikes and demonstrations outside of the Central Government Complex. These students included Joshua Wong, the convenor of Scholarism, a student organisation established in 2011 with a strong opposition agenda against Chinese National Education. During the demonstration, Joshua Wong and other students pushed the first domino of the UM by climbing over barricades to take over a closed-off demonstration area outside the Central Government Complex, also known as Civic Square, in order to support the students' efforts to protest the 831 decision. The convenors of Occupy Central announced the initiation of the movement the same night.

### **Loss of hope in traditional institutions**

Cheung (2020) argues that the 2014 UM had two major effects despite its failure to achieve its goal of universal suffrage with unscreened candidates. First, the UM provided an opportunity for the general public to support ideas such as freedom, the individual right to vote, and political equality through civil disobedience against the government. Second, the UM revealed the inability of traditional democratic parties/ pan-democrats to pursue the democratization mission on behalf of their voters. This led the youth to lose hope in the pan-democrats and culminated in the deinstitutionalization of democratization in Hong Kong (Ip, 2020; p.75). The youth took matters into their own hands, which gave rise to the localists, who were more aligned with the idea that traditional democratic parties, the special administrative government, and the central government had lost their credibility in their failure to deliver political reform.

Lee and Lo (2020) evaluated Hong Kong youth's sense of political discontent towards the Hong Kong government. They found that younger respondents responded less favourably towards Hong Kong legal and political institutions, relative to older respondents (Lee and Lo, 2020; 868-870). This correlation between age and perception has revealed a glaring value gap between the younger and older generations, and this difference in values might have contributed to the rising localism sentiments in Hong Kong. The deficit in the democratic procedures of selecting political representation in the city has induced structural political inequalities in Hong Kong, which limited political participation for the youth, and further marginalised them; as a result, political trust in the Hong Kong government deteriorated among the youth, undermining government legitimacy.

### **Shift toward radical civic participation**

As discussed above, after being disappointed by the traditional pan-democratic parties, people took matters into their own hands to pursue their vision of Hong Kong, giving rise to a type of citizen-led "street politics" (Ip 2020, as cited in Lam 2021). Within this "street politics" came the rise of the charismatic localist leader, Edward Leung Tin Kei.

Edward Leung graduated from the University of Hong Kong in 2016 with a Bachelor of Arts in Philosophy. He also coined the famous slogan used during the 2019 Anti-ELAB protest: "Liberate Hong Kong. Revolution of our times" (Ku 2020). At the beginning of 2016, Edward was running for the Legislative Council New Territories East by-election, with an agenda focused primarily on his localist ideals. During the Chinese New Year of 2016, he was involved in the conflicts between street vendors and the police in Mong Kok, which was later designated as a riot by the Hong Kong government.

Leung's involvement in the incident in Mong Kok made him famous for his localist ideals and radical strategies among youth but also led to his imprisonment (Cheung, 2020;

p.325). The conflict was later referred to as the “Fishball Revolution”, which marked a paradigm shift in civic participation in Hong Kong: a shift towards violence. Cheung (2020) argues that as people learned from their experience from the UM, they lost faith in the old peaceful way of civic participation towards democratization, which had given rise to new “Courageous and Mighty” (勇武) groups. These groups did not shy away from physical confrontation with law enforcement because they sought to get responses from both the general public and the government as to their ideals. Localist ideals and radical forms of protest had attracted the liking of youth, who became their public opinion base. It is important to note that the localists, led by the charismatic Leung and his ideals, is an institution that became embodied in Leung’s party, Hong Kong Indigenous (本土民族前線). The radical strategies attracted significant attention in Hong Kong society, as such violent demonstrations only existed in the memories of those who lived through the 1967 Hong Kong riots. Participants in radical acts had various agendas, and some may have had larger goals than others. This affected the level of risk youth were willing to bear as they participated. Hong Kong Indigenous failed to consolidate its role in coordinating the radicals, which eventually led to leaderless radical movements around the city during the Anti-ELAB protest. The leaderless radical acts adopted the principle of non-hierarchical respect for different types of radical behaviors, particularly varying degrees of violent acts, from vandalism to petrol bombing (Ku, 2020; p.113).

### **Protest Militancy**

Ku (2020) observed this shift from the largely pacifist protest in UM to the more physical protest militancy of the Anti-ELAB protest. The previous experience in the confrontation with police had become a point of reference for the protesters. Through the process of protest militancy, the participants, who were mostly youth, found the agency to express their repressed frustration towards the status quo even if it meant that it could worsen



the situation (Ho, 2022; p. 239). It was clear at the time that the government had a strong reaction towards the violence and took a hard stand towards protest militancy, citing it as riots, but violence was seen as the only means where protesters could force the government to make a stand and respond to their demands.

When discussing the violence in the protests, it becomes politically problematic to describe the participants as protesters or rioters, which also reflects the sentiments behind the two camps: the yellow camp, which is supportive of the protest and the protesters, and the blue camp, which supports the police and the government. As such, in this section, I will refer to participants in violent activities such as vandalism and physical confrontation with the police as radicals. Radicals were committed to violence in the protest because, in their view, there would not be any progress in the cause of democratization if the government was not forced to respond. They intended to destabilize the present stalemate (Ho 2022). Violence was pervasive towards the end of the Anti-ELAB protests of 2019 when radicals began to vandalize infrastructure and public facilities and became involved in physical conflicts with people from the opposing camp. The radicals' activities reached their climax in occupying two university campuses, the Chinese University of Hong Kong, and the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. The confrontation between the radicals and the police resulted in the mass arrest of radicals.

### **The Implementation of National Security Law**

The rising scale of protests has prompted the PRC Congress to make an unprecedented move to extend the coverage of the National Security Law in China and apply to Hong Kong. As discussed in the introduction, this move circumvented the local legislation procedure which would have involved debate and discussion in the legislative council, where it would be expected that the pan-democrats would oppose such legislation. The implementation of National Security had a significant effect on Hong Kong society in that it led to the ultimate

prosecution of the 47 pan-democratic legislators on charges of subversion under the Hong Kong security law. The pan-democratic legislators were arrested for participating in the primaries held by the scholar Benny Tai, who was also a co-convenor of the 2014 Occupy Central movement. The primaries aimed to narrow the list of candidates to run in the upcoming legislative council election, so that the pan-democrats could get the majority of the legislative council to force the government's hands by vetoing its policies until the demand from the pan-democrats was met. It is worth mentioning that at the time, the collaboration between the localists and the pan-democrats had allowed the latter to become relevant again, although temporarily, in the sight of the great scheme to take back the Legislative Council (Ho, 2023); critics even said that "*the left* (traditional pan-democrats) *has nowhere to go and so is forced... to turn right* (radical localist)" (Ho, 2022; p. 239). Considering the landslide victory of the pan-democrats and localists in the 2019 District Council elections (Cheung, 2020), the chance to win a majority of seats was promising and hence posed a high threat to the Hong Kong government.

### **Lifeboat Programs**

The implementation of the National Security Law by circumventing the Hong Kong legislature, the incarceration of the pan-democrats, and the sweeping change to the electoral system in the Legislative Council attracted attention from governments around the world, and most particularly the United Kingdom, the city's former ruler. As a response, the UK government introduced the British National (Overseas) [BN(O)] visa program for Hong Kong citizens and their children who previously possessed a BN(O) passport, which was given to Hong Kong citizens for traveling purposes during the colonial era (GOV.UK, 2020). In the Chinese government's position, this decision to offer a visa program for BNO(O) holders to relocate to the United Kingdom breached the pledge made in the Sino-British Declaration

signed during the handover, whereby the British government was not to provide immigration pathways for general Hong Kong citizens (CGTN, 2023) and that the city's former ruler would not offer citizenship to Hong Kong people in the United Kingdom. Following the United Kingdom, Canada (Government of Canada, 2021) and Australia (Leung and Yau, 2021) have also made similar offers, which are referred to as lifeboat programs.

### **To stay or to leave?**

The Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups (HKFYG) is a non-profit organization founded in 1960 and is the largest youth organization in Hong Kong. The organization published a report in 2021 on the youth immigration phenomenon. The study employed both quantitative questionnaires and qualitative interviews to collect its data since late 2020. The study discovered that 28.6% of the youth (18-34 years old) who responded to the questionnaire indicated an intention to emigrate. Their reasons included the implementation of the National Security Law, frustration towards the Hong Kong government, and being tired of social unrest. The responses reflected a lack of confidence in the Hong Kong government among the youth. The study also found in its 17 qualitative interviews that the participants felt that the government administration did not care for public sentiments and public understanding of their policy. It further revealed that 76% of the respondents expressed their lack of trust in the government and 43.6% of the respondents even said that they had no hope for Hong Kong's future.

The question of why youth are staying despite social turmoil in recent years has become critical to understanding the future of the city. The information provided here is intended to provide a situational context to understand the marginalized and volatile position experienced by the youth, and it becomes the environmental cause for the Anti-ELAB protest to spin out of control. In the succeeding section, the youth's condition will be discussed alongside their

reasons to remain. These events since 2014 have contributed significantly to the construction of the political identity and protest experiences of the people I interviewed, and it is against this backdrop that I will now move towards their views on their future.

## **Analysis**

The ethnographic interviews I conducted revealed three major patterns in youths' decisions to stay in Hong Kong – kinship, friendship, and economic prospects.

### **Kinship**

Chinese culture has a strong emphasis on the responsibilities of offspring to take care of their parents, especially when their parents are no longer able to care for themselves. It is considered a form of reciprocity for the children to care for their parents as they were once cared for by their parents, and people who fail to do this could be judged by relatives and fellow Chinese community members for not fulfilling their filial duties. As one participant in my study told me:

“It would be cruel of me to leave my parents by themselves because I come from a small family, if I came from a big family, my responsibility and contribution would not have mattered.” (Participant 3, P3)

P3 denoted the moral significance of the duty of care by using the word cruel to describe the failure of this responsibility, which is expected in the intimate kinship relationship in a typical nuclear family.

In addition to the duty of care, it is unlikely that the older generation can emigrate as easily as the younger generation due to their limited language skills. While the younger

generation might have benefited from their mandatory education, their language skills and social skills are more developed than their parents. The older generations tend to be less capable and willing to relocate abroad as they would need to adjust to a new environment; they would also lose their familiar friends and neighborhood which constituted their independent life. Therefore, when my participant contemplates leaving Hong Kong, the responsibility to care for their family is also part of their consideration.

“My mum refuses to immigrate, she made that very clear, and she is also not happy with me immigrating. What am I going to do? Abandon her?” (Participant 2, P2)

P2 came from a single family, which could give context to understand this quote. Being the only close kin to his mother, he feels responsible by Chinese tradition to care for his mother. His mother also has a stronger emphasis and expectation on his carrying out filial piety duty, as he grew up in an environment that values Chinese tradition more than the typical Hong Konger. Therefore, in this context, it is difficult for my participant to imagine leaving his mother by herself for his own goal.

“If I came from a big family, whether I am to immigrate or not would not make a different to my family. Since I am not (from a big family), I don’t think it is possible for me to just leave Hong Kong.” (Participant 3, P3)

P3 came from a family of 4, having one older brother, and also emphasized the importance of having a sibling when considering long-term care for his parent due to the possibility of immigration.

Another participant, participant 6 (P6), also came from a single-parent family. Unlike P2, P6 came from a slightly bigger family, having two other siblings. He is also the only participant in my study to have indicated an intention to leave Hong Kong and was in the planning process. In our conversation, he echoed P2's view on filial piety; however, he also stressed that having siblings offered him flexibility. P6 is in a stable relationship, he shared that he would like to get married and have a child with his partner, but he does not intend to do these things in Hong Kong. It is particularly worth noting this intention because my other participants, who may or may not be in a relationship, also maintained similar views on Hong Kong not being a suitable place for child upbringing. They insisted that they would need an environment better than Hong Kong's in order to start their family.

“My grandpa keeps asking when I will get married, he really wanted to see me having children. However, I cannot imagine myself getting married before my thirties or having a kid in Hong Kong, I don't want the financial burden of raising a child in this city, when I am not confident of its future. At the moment, I am staying in Hong Kong partly because I want to spend some time with my family” (Participant 6, P6)

Hang Seng Bank, a well-known local bank, estimates that it costs around HK6 million dollars to bring up a child in Hong Kong, stressing the significance of making early planning for saving and retirement (Hang Seng, 2022). This estimate has become a worrisome reality for Hong Kong people. P6's account reflected the reality faced by youth when planning for their future. This financial burden deters people from planning their family's future in Hong Kong. Without a doubt, P6's intention to relocate out of Hong Kong partly played into his negative outlook towards Hong Kong; his desire to stay is mostly due to the uncertainty in immigration and his hope to spend more time with his aging grandparents. “There is no point

in leaving and making the elderly feel sad, only to be unhappy after arriving at the new place, and even having to return due to not finding a job, which would cause even more worry for them.” (P6)

While most of my participants did not have children, it is worth bearing in mind that parental status becomes a factor when young adults approach the notion of immigration. Lui, Sun, and Hsiao (2022) found that parental status becomes a dominant factor in emigration consideration regardless of the political orientation of the individual. The parental status of the respondents was a motive for them to consider emigration (Lui, Sun, and Hsiao, 2020; 7) as they seek to provide the best environment for their children. There is also the desire to fulfil filial duty in relocating for a better child-rearing environment. Having the experience of police brutality triggered their fear for their children’s future in the city, fearing that their children will suffer potential physical harm (Lui, Sun, and Hsiao, 2020). On the other hand, pan-government respondents expressed their disappointment towards the Hong Kong education system as it had failed to educate the youth with positive values(Lui, Sun, and Hsiao, 2020), which culminated in their involvement in radical demonstrations among youth.

Lui, Sun, and Hsiao (2020) also discuss how respondents who were parents had to negotiate their desire to fulfil filial duties when considering emigration, as the older generation is less likely to emigrate with the younger family. Should the respondent position serve as a caretaker to their original family, fulfilling filial duties, or emigrating abroad without their parents to safeguard their children’s future? Among my participants, there is an account that demonstrated some of the considerations young parents might make when they made the decision to stay:

“Being working parents, we hope to get help from our parents as much as possible....

the core reason for me to stay in Hong Kong is my children. I think it is also the

reason that many parents decided to move abroad. In one case, I heard that the parents decided to move to the UK with their children because even the children's teachers at the international school in Hong Kong were moving. The decision of parents to immigrate to the UK is mostly seeking for a better education opportunity for their children. I went through the local education system, and I do not see any issue of letting my daughter to go through it, as long as she could handle it. However, I do plan to have her studying abroad, at latest by university. I think studying abroad will offer a chance to broaden her horizons." (Participant 11, P11)

P11, who is slightly older than my other participants, has two children. He was offered a job opportunity in Singapore when he found out his wife was pregnant. Instead of pursuing an overseas opportunity, P11 decided to develop his career in Hong Kong. He understands the quality of education in both Hong Kong and overseas, but he wishes his children could at least attempt the local education system. He sees the quality of overseas education in providing dynamic experiences, but he also wishes his daughter could make an attempt in local education, as he did himself. The tendency to send one's children overseas, as discussed in the earlier-mentioned literature (Lui, Sun, and Hsiao, 2020) is relevant to the decision process in my participant's case, though it did not capture the complex process of decision-making with regard to my participant's individual characteristics: he preferred his daughter to experience the local program unless the situation made that unpalatable.

### **Friendship**

Besides kinship, interpersonal relationships between my participants and their friends are also a critical factor in their staying in Hong Kong. Friends are an important medium for youth to receive information and discuss their future plans; their friend's experience often



becomes instrumental to their decisions. While friendship is important to people's decisions at all age ranges, it is particularly influential to youth. In my experience interacting with my participants, I noticed a general tendency for their source of reference to often come from their friends over their families.

“I really appreciate my rock climbing community here in Hong Kong, and I don't think it is likely that I can find another group of people who can give me the same kind of comfort and support this group had offered me. Rock climbing has been the only thing that had kept my sanity during this whole Covid time.” (Participant 5, P5)

P5 was injured during the protest and the injury left incurable damage to his eyesight. The experience of conflicts from the protest had troubled him deeply. Most of my participants were unharmed physically during the conflicts and protests, and yet for P5, the injury is a permanent scar. He was depressed upon realizing the injury was permanent and had a difficult time recovering from the trauma. Picking up rock climbing allowed him to slowly rebuild his confidence in his physical abilities and embrace the traumatic experience. In this context, it became clear that the rock-climbing community which he built during the process of recovery, has played a significant role in his growth and new self-identity formation process as a bouldering enthusiast.

### **Economic Prospect**

Hong Kong is one of the world's global financial centers. Since the protests and the pandemic had ceased, the government has been emphasizing the urgency to consolidate Hong Kong's economy, which is central to the city's future development. My participants generally agreed that Hong Kong provides good economic prospects, and some participants pointed out

that the booming economy allowed them to build a career rapidly which would be impossible elsewhere without postgraduate degrees. The potential of losing these benefits after emigration is considered as opportunity costs<sup>1</sup> when considering the notion of leaving Hong Kong.

“Hong Kong is really the place where you want to be when you are looking to make money. I want to make the best out of my youth and explore the world. The business travel opportunities in my job made it easier for me to travel.” (Participant 9, P9)

“I do think that Hong Kong has a good job prospect for me. As an engineer, I am happy to work in Hong Kong and my earning is much higher than similar roles in other countries after tax. Also, I have developed a professional network here which I will need to start from zero if I relocate.” (P11)

Both of these accounts from participants express their interest to continue working in Hong Kong. The account of P11 also demonstrated the preference towards Hong Kong’s low taxation for income tax among high-earning individuals. When I asked them whether they had considered a future plan to move out of Hong Kong, they mentioned the opportunity cost of the relocation. In the case of immigration, the opportunity cost for my participants might be the career prospects which they have in Hong Kong, should they choose to leave.

Most of my participants received their education in Hong Kong and their experience abroad is limited; they worry it would be an obstacle for them to find a job abroad. P6 shared that one of his friends who previously worked as an office worker relocated to Toronto recently, and he was struggling to find a job there as he lacked local working experience.

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<sup>1</sup> Opportunity cost is an economics term meaning the cost of the next best alternative when a person has to choose between multiple things.

“Why would a college student want to work at a bubble tea shop? In countries like Canada, they don't recognize internship experience from Hong Kong. It will be easier to find work even if you have just part time working experience there. I went to university and earned my degree, so of course I don't want to be a second-class citizen. I want to leave Hong Kong at a level where I can use my expertise. (If you can use your expertise, wouldn't it be better to stay in Hong Kong to make money?) Well, I wouldn't want to stay in this environment in Hong Kong.” (P6)

The Hong Kong government published the youth development blueprint at the end of 2022, which outlined the government's policies toward youth, and conveys the government vision for youth development.

“Nurture a new generation of young people with an affection for our country and Hong Kong and equipped with global perspectives, an aspiring mind-set and positive thinking. Provide young people with an enabling environment to cherish hope for the future and strive for continuous growth, so that they can unleash their full potential in society and contribute to Hong Kong, the country and the world.” (HKSAR, 2022)

The vision emphasizes Chinese identity, whereas the 2019 Anti-ELAB protest was seen as a failure by earlier Hong Kong governments to instill a stronger sense of national belonging among local youth. The blueprint is divided into four major sections: *Exploration*, how to encourage youth to explore and prepare for their future; *Hope*, how to instill hope and fulfill dreams of the youth; *Empowerment*, building resilience and developing youth holistically; and *Contribution*, engaging youth to contribute back to the society.

The blueprint also revealed that a little more than half of Hong Kong youth have a bachelor's degree (HKSAR, 2022). Local tertiary education largely depends on government subsidies. In the 2022 Diploma of Secondary Education (DSE) examinations, only 17867 students, around 42% of high school students out of the total 42028 students fulfilled the minimum requirement for university admission (HKEAA, 2022). These 42% of students will need to compete for government-funded bachelor programs, as only 15000 can actually enroll into government-funded university programs.

This statistic provides an insight into youth like P6, to emphasize their university education when contemplating their future career. University-educated youth do not want to settle for jobs that do not match their expectations. Furthermore, P6 is working in the finance industry as a data analyst, an industry which the Hong Kong government has vowed to develop. It is expected that this industry will see substantial growth from government policies, benefiting industry practitioners. As P6 develops his career, it will allow him to build up stronger experience for his future plan to relocate to the country of his preference.

Another participant in my study also raised concerns about securing a job abroad:

“When I evaluate my career path development abroad, I realized that my industry has limited opportunities. If I move to Canada, it is likely that I will have to change my profession to one in which I have no edge over any other candidates in the job market.” (P2)

P2 is an engineer. When he first heard of the Canadian relocation visa schemes, he was intrigued but realized later that his profession in Canada prefers to hire locals. Therefore, it is likely that he will need to start his career in an industry which he is unfamiliar with, should he relocate to Canada.

Apart from the opportunity cost of leaving Hong Kong and limited international job prospects, a small fraction of youth who are homeowners have chosen to stay in Hong Kong as they find the situation to be in their interest. Hong Kong has had a booming economy, which has kept people here as well as attracted international talents; however, it has also led to a high cost of living in the city. Hong Kong has one of the most valuable property markets in the world, with some of its properties among the world's most expensive. The median income of the city's working class has been dwarfed by the city's property values, and purchasing a home in the city is usually a joint effort between two generations in a family. The rental market is no less competitive in the property market, where rents could be half of a person's monthly salary. As a result, the high cost of living has imposed a considerable strain on people living in the city, especially for youth who would like to establish their independence by moving out from their parent's residence.

The property market puts young homeowners in a good financial position, where they benefit financially from their property value. The rise in property values allows them to afford a better quality of life than most youth. Participant 10 (P10), a young homeowner who works in professional services gave the following account during our conversation.

“I am pretty comfortable in Hong Kong, if you ask me why I am not leaving, I might not be able to give you a reason. I know that I am in my comfort zone, and I found it rather pleasing, I do not see a need to make any change for the time being.” (P10)

Unlike most Hong Kong youth, the young homeowners do not have the burden of paying rent or living with others but are free to enjoy their personal space, which is also what is sought by youth abroad. However, it would be inaccurate to say that this group of youth who seem to be privileged in terms of their economic stability are supportive of the

government's position to maintain the status quo; my participants also expressed disappointment towards the social situation and the failure of the government during the protest. However this disappointment does not become a strong enough motivation for them to break out of their comfort zone.

### Love for Hong Kong

Anthropologist Gordon Mathews has been observing Hong Kong identities for decades. In his book "Hong Kong, China: Learning to Belong to a Nation", co-authored with Eric Kit-wai Ma and Tai-lok Lui, Mathews (2008) argues that Hong Kong people have a vague national identity due to British colonization since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Before China resumed its authority in 1997, there had been an absence of a substantial national identity education, as student informants displayed a lack of understanding of the idea of belonging to a nation (Mathews, Ma, and Lui, 2008). Instead, a global market identity had transcended the national identity for many Hong Kong people; it was not expected of Hong Kong people to have developed a sense of national identity.

"Despite the salience of this sense of separate Hong Kong identity in recent decades, few have ever seriously advocated that Hong Kong become independent. No one, not even the most fervent advocate of Hong Kong, has seriously suggested at any time over the past forty years that **Hong Kong people should be willing to "sacrifice their lives for Hong Kong" – such a cry would have been seen as insane.**"

(Mathews, Ma, Lui, 2008; p. 12, emphasis added)

The authors hypothesized that Hong Kong people might be developing a new form of national identity different from British and Chinese national identity. The hypothesis was

perhaps realized through the form of radical localism which was observed during the 2019 Anti-ELAB protest. Mathews (2020) observed that the young Hongkongers had developed a new form of national identity towards civic Hong Kong identity, rather than the ethnic Chinese identity.

“Let the PLA (the Chinese army, the People’s Liberation Army) come! **I will die for Hong Kong.**” (Khan and Fan, 2019 as cited in Mathews, 2020; p. 266)

My participants shared their conflicted feelings towards Hong Kong and how their decision to stay had been affected by their ambivalence toward the local culture.

“I love Hong Kong, but I also hate Hong Kong” (Participant 4, P4)

P4 is an avid devotee of Cantonese culture, and throughout our conversation, I noticed his choice of words tends to reflect his passion for Cantonese culture: he intentionally used more classical words than my other participants. One example would be the use of “tong4 faan1” (唐番), which refers to Chinese and foreign. When the National Security Law (NSL) was first introduced in the city, people were very nervous about the potential persecution and censorship, especially towards Cantonese culture, which became intertwined with localist ideologies. Localists had a strong preference for maintaining the language difference between Hong Kong and mainland China to reinforce its local identity; therefore, people were worried that Cantonese culture could be seen as anti-China. Some opinions suggested that a new Hong Kong should be built abroad in order to preserve the purist form of Cantonese culture without any censorship and manipulation from the mainland Chinese government.

However, P4 disagrees with this idea and argues that Hong Kong cannot be replaced: the streets, the buildings, and the memories cannot be replicated in a foreign land. P4 believes his role lies in Hong Kong if he is truly passionate about preserving the local Cantonese culture; he found himself most comfortable at the place where he grew up and had many memories. P4's passion for the city is definitely not a minority view among my participants. Participant 1 (P1) echoes P4's view strongly when he shares his reasons for staying:

“I am doubtful towards the notion that one could preserve the local culture after they have emigrated. Staying in Hong Kong, I believe I can contribute more towards preserving the local culture. I think these people were trying to justify their personal agenda to emigrate.” (P4)

“I am staying because I really love my city, its people and culture. I do not think rebuilding this city on a foreign land could substitute for the rich history of Hong Kong. I am not a materialistic person, and I am less influenced by my condition in Hong Kong, besides, I think the situation in Hong Kong has yet to arrive at a point where I must go.” (P1)

These two accounts demonstrated a strong sense of belonging to Hong Kong, which I observed consistently among my participants. These youth shared a sense of faith and collective identity towards Hong Kong, and they were keen to contribute to the city's cultural preservation by staying. Among my participants, it is clear that they share a strong recognition of their Hong Kong identity, that they refer to themselves as Hong Kongers and subscribe to Cantonese cultures. Their passion for the city has not been defeated by the failure of the 2019



Anti-ELAB protest nor the introduction of NSL; they are still trying to find room in their daily lives to connect with the city:

“Considering that the government does not care for the people’s opinion these days, I have shifted my effort to concern for animal welfare, such as on animal cruelty, buying and selling of animals. Rather than blackmailing people’s consciences to shop at specific shops based on political belief,<sup>2</sup> I think it is easier to encourage people to pay attention to animal rights.” (Participant 8, P8)

P8 said that her interest in animal rights had developed after the protests, which reminded her of her civic responsibility to care for society. While she acknowledged that room for expressing her opinions might be limited, she found that animal welfare is a topic that could surpass individual political differences to deliver social change. P8’s account is important as it demonstrates that even though she had felt a sense of loss in the changing circumstances after the protest, she was still hoping to work within the boundaries of what could be done. After the implementation of the NSL and the reform to the electoral system, some people might feel that the Hong Kong government had no interest in their opinion, thus giving up their advocacy and their interest in politics.

Another participant also sees that it is meaningful to be informed about the social situation as a citizen:

“I think a basic understanding of the situation is important. I made my choice to not care about the situation by informing myself of what is happening. These kids are not knowing what is going on before they are making their judgement to not care, and this

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<sup>2</sup> This was a common occurrence during and after the 2019 protests.

is oblivious to our society's condition. It is important that people develop their opinion with a basic understanding of the government structures and current issues.” (P2)

P2 shared his belief that it is a fundamental responsibility of university students to be aware of social issues, although room for social change is limited; it is crucial to stay informed, he believed, which is why he was disappointed to see that some of his younger university peers had failed this expectation. In our earlier conversation, P2 said that he had a pessimistic outlook on Hong Kong; he had stopped caring and had given up hope that he could accomplish anything to bring about constructive change in the city. However, his eagerness to expect his fellow university peers to be aware of the situation in Hong Kong seems to contradict his preference to stop caring about the situation:

“I might be a Kong Pig<sup>3</sup> for I choose to do nothing despite what I know of the situation, but they do not even deserve to be called a pig if they hardly know anything that is actually going on” (P2)

P5 echoes this view by feeling distant from the younger generation. He found that the education curriculum, especially contemporary history, had intentionally cultivated students to forget the embarrassing events for the Beijing government.

“I feel estranged with those who are younger than me, they are more similar with their mainland counterpart, they are more familiar with their culture and ignorant of the significant historic events such as the Tiananmen Square event.” (P2)

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<sup>3</sup> Kong Pig is a combination of Hong Kong and Pig, which is a derogatory term describing the type of people in Hong Kong who only cares about eating, having fun, and sleeping, like a pig – without any concern for the ongoing social situation, in particular to the political affairs.

“A teacher friend of mine, who immigrated to the United Kingdom recently, said that she would rather adapt to a new place, than having to adjust to changes in a familiar place (meaning Hong Kong).” (P1)

The lack of knowledge of historical events that were significant to my participants among younger students whom they have observed might be partly a result of the changing curriculum for students. Teachers were among those who felt particular pressure over delivering these changes, and thus some of them had left Hong Kong.

### **What will be the future?**

When discussing the reasons to stay, my participants and I slowly moved towards the topic of the future and what they think the future will be, since they have chosen to stay in Hong Kong for now. This question is important as it provides insight into how youth consider the prospects and consequences relating to their decision to stay in Hong Kong. When I moved towards asking them to conceptualize their feelings about staying, some revealed that they wished to stay due to their strong sense of belonging to Hong Kong; however, others told me that their decision to stay is more of a non-decision in the sense that it was a matter of the circumstances in which they were put:

“People who didn’t do anything ended up still having a better life than I do, why should I be bothered? ... I do not have much of a future plan as of now, in such a tumultuous time, you are only trying to stay afloat. The visibility is low, so you could only proceed step by step.” (P3)

P3 shared his sense of “powerlessness” (無力感) towards the circumstances in Hong Kong. He used to be a very vocal person who would comment and criticize the news on his social media; he had a strong sense of justice and morality. Since the protests ceased due to the pandemic and implementation of the NSL, he stopped updating his social media. He shared that he had learned to care less about the world, as it allowed him to control his temper and become more at peace. Since the implementation of the NSL, people have become more cautious about the content they share on social media, considering that the National Security Bureau has made several arrests against internet speech (Chan et al., 2022). P3’s change of behavior might have some relevance to understanding a broader phenomenon of youth becoming less vocal towards social issues in Hong Kong, thus leading to a drop in civic participation.

In a long interview, the conversation might get a bit lost in words, especially on abstract ideas such as the future. In my interviews, I carried the Youth Development Blueprint with me in case my participants wished to find something for inspiration. There is a chapter on how the government intends to instill hope among youth by realizing their dreams, and where the government also outlined the city’s future eight areas of development<sup>4</sup>.

Towards the end of my interview with P2, I read part of the chapter to him to see what he thought of the government’s strategy to instill hope in him, and this is his response.

“[The blueprint] are just clusters of fancy words and jargon, providing no actual explanation. How are they planning to push forward the idea? Let’s say the cultural exchange initiative, is Hong Kong going to be a mediator or a leader in this vision? I am confused by the plan. Look at the Chinese Opera Center and the Palace Museum,

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<sup>4</sup> The eight areas are: finance, innovation and technology, cultural exchange, building a trade center, a shipping center, and an aviation hub, developing legal and dispute resolution, and intellectual property trade.

how many Hong Kong people are actually interested in these venues? Rather than keep building these venues, isn't it more practical to elevate people's cultural knowledge? People in Sham Shui Po, for example, are not likely going to be able to connect with our initiative in cultures. Who exactly is our audience of the promotion?" (P2)

Although the chapter made some strong points, it hardly convinced P2, let alone instilled hope in him. He found the government's initiatives to be ambiguous and unrelatable; he was frustrated about the situation, yet he had no means to change it.

The research conducted by the HKFYG in 2022 provided some more context to understand how Hong Kong youth see the future of Hong Kong through their mixed-method approach (HKFYG, 2022). The study found that Hong Kong youth have a strong urge to contribute to the city, yet they found the government had no interest in their opinions. This might contribute to the sense of futility experienced by the youth such as P2, in feeling that the government policy is irrelevant.

### Tolerable circumstances

Even though my participants expressed their disappointment at the circumstances in Hong Kong, some still find Hong Kong to be a place which is tolerable. Considering they held negative outlooks towards the future of Hong Kong, I was surprised by this finding. For this group of participants, their decision to stay could be understood as a manifestation of their underlying cost-benefit analysis. To a certain degree, their decision to stay is a type of pragmatism they have adopted with regard to the circumstances. They aim to make the most out of what they can, until things become intolerable:

“There are no reasons to leave yet for me. Although I am seeing the changes in our society, the situation has yet to develop to the point that I must go.” (P1)

Some of my participants, even though they did not have a clear idea of their future, still found Hong Kong to be a much better place to be than other places in the world at the moment:

“I still believe in the legal system, that we have a good foundation...If they respect the procedure, it will be better for the world...Hong Kong is still a good place to work, it is profitable. It is still far from the situation as we see in Mainland China. As long as I can still make money and prosper...” (P4)

“I know things are not as before, but it is still not a bad place to be. Hong Kong will not become what we see in Xinjiang.” (P8)

“The environment in Hong Kong is not ideal but I don’t find it all that bad yet. After all, there is no absolute freedom anywhere. I have found myself to be acclimated with the changes following the NSL; therefore, I don’t think leaving is urgent for me.” (P11)

The message they were conveying is that the circumstances in Hong Kong have not become intolerable. They were willing to stay because they still had some hope for the future, in terms of their own realistic needs and potential ways of contributing to society.

### **Significance of the youth migration in Hong Kong**

In some regions, migration might be a rite of passage, particularly for societies with limited opportunities for youth, especially countries with developing economies. As such, in order to pursue a better future, youth are expected to go abroad to seek better career and life opportunities. The context of Hong Kong is noteworthy because Hong Kong is a vibrant economic hub with a low unemployment rate; however, some of the youth would rather give up this economic opportunity to pursue democracy and freedom abroad. This ongoing migration trend among the youth in Hong Kong warrants detailed study as it is one of the few instances in which many people are migrating away from a developed region. This migration trend is strongly linked to the subjective perceptions of the changing political situation in Hong Kong among youth.

This phenomenon may be attributed to a post-materialistic framework among many young people, as distinct from the economic development framework that is dominant among many mainland Chinese youth (Pang and Jiang, 2019; P.5). Individual self-expression and personal freedom are among the values emphasized in post-materialism (Pang and Jiang, 2019; 17), Hong Kong students may exhibit these values by giving a higher priority to civic participation and freedom of speech (Pang and Jiang, 2019; 19); Hong Kong students expect their government to act according to these standards. Therefore, many youths were understandably disappointed by the changing circumstances in Hong Kong after the implementation of the NSL.

All in all, in contextualizing the aspiration for migration, instead of the decision to migrate, the decision to stay is what requires explanation. But of course, all the participants whose words I have shared have their own individual characteristics, their decision to stay has different considerations among the factors illustrated in this paper.

## **Conclusion**

*To stay -- is it to "sell out"?*

The key to studying migration decisions is to understand how the participants make their decisions and what factor means the most to them. Within such a context, informed generalizations can be made to present broader patterns for analysis. Youth are also changing, as they are still in the process of exploring their long-term prospects and personal missions in life. Within only a few short months, when I interviewed some of my participants again, I could already see how within a short span of time, people's views had sometimes changed.

This study has aimed to understand the reasons why some young Hong Kong people, often former protesters, decided to remain in Hong Kong, unlike many other young people, who cannot wait to leave permanently. It is identified through this study, that these youth decided to stay in Hong Kong based on several reasons: 1, Interpersonal relationships (family and friends); 2, economic prospects (opportunities to work and earn a decent salary in relation to their education qualifications); 3, a strong sense of their identity in Hong Kong; 4, faith in the future. The abrupt halt of the 2019 Anti-ELAB protests and the implementation of the National Security Law created a political low-pressure zone for young people seeking democracy in Hong Kong; they were disappointed by the reformation of the legislative council and new district council elections. However, through this research, I have realized that youth in Hong Kong are resilient. Despite constantly being rejected from participation in the system, many youths are still trying to make contributions wherever they can. My ethnographic studies echo the research conducted by the HKFYG in 2022, which showed that Hong Kong youth are aspiring to contribute to social betterment, yet their interest and passion have been overlooked by the government. Although the government claims to have increased the participation of youth in the policy-making process by establishing district-based youth consultative committees, subsequent reports revealed that youth members were restricted to peripheral and



unimportant roles (ONCC, 2023; Wong, 2023). It is critical that youths' desire for civic participation is acknowledged and valued in order for youth to make substantial contributions towards policy design and social issues. Incorporating youth in the policy-making process, on one hand, could provide them with a strong sense of participation, mending the relationship between youth and the government, and on the other hand, this could help prepare youth to become leaders in the city's future development.

While current scholarship has provided much information on the development of the protest and participation of youth in the protest, there has been little investigation of intimate accounts of the youth who participated in the protests, to understand their psychological trauma from the violent confrontations during the protests. Future anthropological research is needed to develop a comprehensive overview to understand how the young protesters reflect on their different forms of participation and how their sense of civic participation has changed thereafter.

It is truly worrying to see the lack of concern for youths' condition while policy is being made in the name of youth. The Youth Development Blueprint is filled with the government's expectations of youth, and their plans to cultivate youth towards the need for the development of the Hong Kong economy, yet the blueprint rarely mentions how the government understands the problems faced by youth. Some even jokingly say that the government's blueprint should be renamed as The Blueprint for Developing Youth, denoting the passive role youth play in shaping the policies aimed to support them. The downfall of so-called "dissident" media, namely *Apple Daily* and *Stand News*, in Hong Kong society has resulted in the media perpetuating pro-establishment opinions, with pro-establishment columnists predominating without any counterbalance (WSJ, 2024). This type of columnist may typically write of youth being underserving and ungrateful towards the government's policy, commentary which solely

aims to entertain its audience rather than providing constructive solutions to the problem of youth development.

A considerable number of youth have taken up the opportunity to emigrate to Canada and the United Kingdom; this is an outflux of bright talents that could have contributed to the city's development. However, the majority of Hong Kong youth remain, including the participants in my interviews. It is imperative that the government and society explore new approaches to engage with youth and reinvigorate their faith in the future of Hong Kong. A city without its youth is a city with no future. Any responsible public administrator should exhaust all means possible to support our city's future generations.

On the other hand, for those who have stayed, as I have explained in earlier sections, it is a matter of realistic consideration of their respective circumstances. It is also true that some of them decided to stay simply because of their distinctive love for Hong Kong. Looking at migration historically, people move in and out of countries because of different events. My professor brought up the example of Americans who emigrated to Canada when Trump was elected president, and who might subsequently realize that they made a wrong decision given the long-term development of the United States. On the other hand, if someone decided to emigrate from 1935 Nazi Germany, they might consider their decision to be the best thing one could ever have made. We cannot know how the situation in Hong Kong will play out historically; Hong Kong is still undergoing transformation and changes. However, those who have decided to stay made the decision for both personal and political reasons, which include their sense that Hong Kong is more than what is been lost politically. Perhaps some people see the outflux of migrants as an opportunity for job promotion within Hong Kong and a different phase in Hong Kong's development that liberated them from unrealistic political pursuits and focused on their economic gains. This is everyday life in Hong Kong today; people adapt to

the ongoing changes taking place in Hong Kong, accepting them until they can no longer tolerate them.

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### **Afterword: A response to the passing of Article 23**

On 18 of March 2023, the Legislative Council made history by passing Article 23, with members of the council and government bureaucrats rejoicing in their success. This news was widely covered and broadcast by the local media. As I had been out of Hong Kong at the time of the news, my reminded me of this news, and how it might affect what I wrote in this paper.

Emily Lau, former chairperson of the Democratic Party, strongly opposed the legislation of Article 23 in 2003 and said in the BBC news documentary (2024) that aired a few weeks before the passing that the government left no space for the public to discuss the Article 23 legislation now, as compared to the open discussing environment in the 2003 public consultation period. As a result, no one had voiced out disagreement to the 2024 public consultation. What she meant by the closed environment for discussing the Article 23

legislation is that the constant emphasis on National Security by the city's Chief Executive, John Lee, has made people censor themselves.

Regina Ip, former secretary for security, now the convenor of the executive council, is also interviewed in the same documentary. The executive council is the chief executive's council in governance and discusses all executive decisions that would be made by the chief executive. Ip sees the shortened consultation period in 2024 compared to the consultation period she had led in 2003 to be sensible. She sees that Hong Kong society has achieved consensus after the 2019 Anti-ELAB protest on the necessity of a national security law; it was only a matter of time before Article 23 was legislated. She also further pointed to the fact that during the consultation period, the public seemed to care more about rather apolitical issues such as the monthly firework show, the Messi-missing incident, and the municipal Solid Waste Charging scheme.

Both of the politicians outlined the reality in Hong Kong, that the legislation is inevitable and well-expected by the public after the implementation of national security law. As the documentary crew moved the interview to the streets and asked for comments on the Article 23 motion, people shrugged away from the camera, leaving some interesting remarks: *(Question prompt by the reporter: Do you support the legislation of Article 23?)*

Young Male: I don't wanna say, as it may break the national security law.

Middle-aged Female: No special view — Are you filming me? — we will have to accept it anyway.

Like any media, BBC has its narrative on the issue and does not cover the whole picture of the social situation; but it does encapsulate what young people, or those around me think of this legislation — that they have no say and will happen anyway, why bother talking about it. Understandably, this administration has a high urgency to complete this historical mission in legislating Article 23, as it echoes their agenda in upholding national security. Now, people are

hoping after the implementation of the Article 23 legislation and national security, the Hong Kong government can return its emphasis on economic development and social development. The impact of Article 23 has little compared to the impact of the national security law; people who would like to leave would not change their intention, and people who would like to stay will likely remain unchanged. As the saying goes, when you have put a leash on the horse, there's little resistance if you also want to put on a saddle.

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