

# PROCEEDINGS OF ASIAN SYMPOSIUM: INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES ACROSS CULTURAL FRONTIERS

## MONOPOLIZING VIOLENCE: HONG KONG POLICE'S USE OF FORCE DURING THE 2019-2020 PROTESTS

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### Abstract

*The violence witnessed during the 2019-2020 protests in Hong Kong is unprecedented from the perspective of both the police force and the public. While protesters employed a diverse means of retaliation, the reaction of the police was considered extreme and led to alleged physical and verbal abuses. The authorities' narrative around violence deprives the protesters of the right to dissent and creates what Walter Benjamin refers to as a monopoly on the use of violence. The reaction of the police, together with Carrie Lam's protection of the institution, worsened the conflict and led to the radicalization of protesters, who called for an independent inquiry into the abuses.*

**Keywords:** police, violence, 2019-2020 protests, Hong Kong, Walter Benjamin

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## Introduction

The pro-democracy protests in 2019-2020 Hong Kong proved unprecedented social mobilization in the region's recent history. Amid tightening control by Beijing, as well during the Covid-19 pandemic, Hongkongers took to the streets to protest not only the proposed extradition bill to the mainland but also the erosion of social democratic practices, the lack of popular political representation, and Chief Executive Lam's governing ills. The evolution of the protests from the bill to the Five Demands is thoroughly documented in the literature.<sup>1</sup> However, one central point to be further researched is the use of violence during the protests, both from the people's and the police's perspectives.

In this light, this paper aims to analyze the role of violence during the 2019-2020 protests, focusing on the justification of violence, and juxtaposing its legitimacy in the case of protesters versus that of authorities. Considering the escalation of violence on both ends during the conflict, one must examine the transformation of the police's image in the eyes of the public: from one of Asia's finest to one of Asia's most hated, in what journalists and PR teams call a "crisis of confidence".<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the central research question is "How did the police response to the protests influence their outcome?". For this endeavour, several methodological elements are worth noting.

On the one hand, Walter Benjamin's *Critique of Violence*<sup>3</sup> is employed as a theoretical framework to answer an additional question: "Why is violence monopolized by the authorities, rendering it an instrument of change inaccessible to the protesters?". On the other hand, both qualitative and quantitative sources are used. For the qualitative analysis, a netnographic approach is employed in the form of ninety statements by Hong Kong civilians from X, formerly known as Twitter. These are comments following the increase of violence by the police, portraying the development of mistrust

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<sup>1</sup> Francis L. F. Lee, et al, "Hong Kong's Summer of Uprising: From Anti-Extradition to Anti-Authoritarian Protests," *China Review*, vol. 19, no. 4, 2019, pp. 1-32, [<https://www.jstor.org/stable/26838911>], accessed 5 Nov. 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Jason Wordie, "How Hong Kong police, once considered 'Asia's finest', fell from grace", *South China Morning Post*, 26 Jul 2019, [<https://www.scmp.com/magazines/post-magazine/short-reads/article/3020230/how-hong-kong-police-once-considered-asias>], accessed 3 Nov. 2023.

<sup>3</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Critique of violence", in *Selected Writings*, vol 1, London, 1996, pp. 236-252, [<https://fswg.files.wordpress.com/2015/04/benjamin-critique-of-violence-new-translation.pdf>], accessed at 1 Nov. 2023

towards the authorities not only by the protesters but also by the public at large. Such statements are pivotal to grasping the attitudes mustering amongst Hongkongers, and to understanding one of the Five Demands, that of forming a commission of inquiry into alleged police brutality.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the quantitative data (such as the amount of ammunition used, the number of protesters arrested, and the number of complaints against the police) comes from the report issued by the Independent Police Complaints Council after the protests.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, there is legitimate criticism concerning the activity and impartiality of the IPCC, considering its limitations in accurately assessing the situation and the corruption claims.<sup>6</sup> The report provides an overview of the alleged police misconduct, covering the incidents chronologically from June 2019 to the beginning of 2020, most relevantly including the number of complaints to be investigated, as well as the number of victims and arsenal used during the conflicts. The theoretical background is analyzed at the beginning of the paper, continuing with the unfolding of the events and the public's reaction to the governing strategy and police violence.

### **Theoretical Background on the Justification of Violence**

When endeavoring to analyze the role of violence within the 2019-2020 protests, it is imperative to assess what qualifies as violent acts, particularly given the narrative of authorities portraying protesters as being violent, chaotic, and unmanageable. As Judith Butler comments: “we cannot simply start with a definition of violence and then proceed to debate under what conditions violence is justified or not, for we have first to settle the question of which framework is naming violence, *through what erasures, and for what*

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<sup>4</sup> Wong Tsui-kai, “Hong Kong protests: What are the ‘five demands’? What do protesters want?”, *South China Morning Post*, 20 Aug 2019, [<https://www.scmp.com/yp/discover/news/hong-kong/article/3065950/hong-kong-protests-what-are-five-demands-what-do>], accessed at 1 Nov. 2023.

<sup>5</sup> “A Thematic Study by the IPCC on the Public Order Events arising from the Fugitive Offenders Bill since June 2019 and the Police Actions in Response”, IPCC, 2020/2021, [[https://www.ipcc.gov.hk/en/public\\_communications/ipcc\\_thematic\\_study\\_report.html](https://www.ipcc.gov.hk/en/public_communications/ipcc_thematic_study_report.html)], accessed 10 Jun. 2023, hereafter called “the IPCC Report”.

<sup>6</sup> Amy Gunia, “Hong Kong’s Police Watchdog is unable to do its job”, *Time*, 11 Nov. 2019, [<https://time.com/5723615/hong-kong-ipcc-police-complaints/>], accessed 1 Nov. 2023.

*purpose* (emphasis added)”,<sup>7</sup> for it is crucial to determine the validity of the protesters’ actions through this lens. Carrie Lam’s communication strategy throughout the protests proved disastrous, by deepening the gap between the civil unrest and the governing bodies.<sup>8</sup> Her statements exonerate the acts of the police by expressing solidarity with “her colleagues”, and, at the same time, create a framework of collective blame for the public. The violence in this case is attributed solely to the public, erasing accountability of the officers, to maintain the sole authority over an increasingly tense conflict.

On the one hand, one must address the theoretical perspectives regarding the use of violence from the view of the protesters. There is ample literature on the purpose of violence in achieving societal progress. As Al-Gharbi comments, there is a need for violent means from society targeting authorities to allow the existence of non-violent means:

“One has to speak to power in a language it understands. It must be made clear that there are consequences for ignoring dissidents, that a return to the status quo is not an option. Shy of this, there is no change. Violence is always unfortunate, especially insofar as it is indiscriminate. However, these outbursts must not be reflexively dismissed—if for no other reason than because it is violence that enables nonviolent resistance.”<sup>9</sup>

From this perspective, the retaliation from protesters toward officers is justified for ensuring a political milieu in which once the fundamental requirements from citizens are resolved, there is no need for violent confrontations. Al-Gharbi continues to disseminate the relationship between the response of the community and the acts of the police force in a manner most relevant to the situation in Hong Kong, stating that:

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<sup>7</sup> Judith Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence. An Ethico-Political Bind*, London: Verso, 2020, p. 96, [<https://iberian-connections.yale.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/The-Force-of-Nonviolence-An-Ethico-Political-Bind-by-Judith-Butler.pdf>].

<sup>8</sup> See Carrie Lam’s addresses “Police Crucial to the rule of law”, 24 Sep 2019, [[https://www.news.gov.hk/eng/2019/09/20190924/20190924\\_105545\\_549.html](https://www.news.gov.hk/eng/2019/09/20190924/20190924_105545_549.html)], accessed 15 Oct. 2023.

<sup>9</sup> Musa Al-Gharbi, “There is no social change without coercion: Race, Baltimore, and how violence makes nonviolence possible”, 2015, *Salon*, [[https://www.salon.com/2015/05/02/there\\_is\\_no\\_social\\_change\\_without\\_coercion\\_race\\_baltimore\\_and\\_how\\_violence\\_makes\\_nonviolence\\_possible/](https://www.salon.com/2015/05/02/there_is_no_social_change_without_coercion_race_baltimore_and_how_violence_makes_nonviolence_possible/)], accessed 1 Nov. 2023.

"Cops need to know that if they abuse their position, they will go to jail themselves. And if the system won't deal with it, the community will: officers will face decreased public cooperation and increased hostility—rendering their jobs ever more difficult and dangerous until they change the way they operate."

This assessment proves useful considering the tension between protesters and the officers, as can be seen in the demand for independent evaluation of the police's alleged crimes and, more radically, in targeting the officers, in some cases their family members, toward the end of 2019.

On the other hand, it is imperative to view the use of violence from the authorities' perspective through Benjamin's lens. In his critique, Benjamin states that the purpose of violence, or threat of violence, is as a mechanism to ensure the existence and operation of the state and its governing bodies:<sup>10</sup>

"(...) one might perhaps consider the surprising possibility that the law's interest in a monopoly of violence vis-a-vis individuals is explained not by the intention of preserving legal ends but, rather, by the intention of preserving the law itself; *that violence, when not in the hands of the law, threatens it not by the ends that it may pursue but by its mere existence outside the law.*<sup>11</sup> (emphasis added)"

While the actor in question is not a state but a Special Administrative Region, his observations apply nonetheless in the case of Hong Kong, particularly given the increased interventions and pressure from Beijing during the conflict. Hence, the authorities create a monopoly on violence, allowing its existence within the means of their jurisdiction, while prohibiting it from the public at large in any capacity, even for social progress. Moreover, when it comes to the police, Benjamin specifies that it combines both law-preserving and law-making violence;<sup>12</sup> it protects the status quo, while simultaneously creating new standards of societal obedience. This is evident in the Hong Kong police responses to the protests, particularly in its alleged use of excessive force. By responding violently to the initially peaceful protests, it antagonized the movement and elicited an even stronger reaction, leading to the radicalization of previously peaceful protesters.

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<sup>10</sup> Benjamin, *op. cit.*, pp. 236- 252.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 239.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 242.

Furthermore, one last point to be addressed regarding Benjamin's view of the police in the case of the Hong Kong protests is that of the assertion of defending national security. The narrative of national security has been ever more present in recent years in China's discourse regarding its territories. It justifies not only the crackdown on the protests in this case but also its increasingly more aggressive actions towards Taiwan and its neighboring states. As Benjamin states:

"Rather, the "law" of the police really marks the point at which the state, whether from impotence or because of the immanent connections within any legal system, can no longer guarantee through the legal system the empirical ends that it desires at any price to attain. Therefore, the police intervene *"for security reasons"* in countless cases where no clear legal situation exists, when they are not merely, without the slightest relation to legal ends, accompanying the citizen as a brutal encumbrance through a life regulated by ordinances, or simply supervising him. Unlike law, which acknowledges in the "decision" determined by place and time a metaphysical category that gives it a claim to critical evaluation, a consideration of the police institution encounters nothing essential at all. *Its power is formless, like its nowhere-tangible, all-pervasive, ghostly presence in the life of civilized states.*<sup>13</sup> (emphasis added)"

Additionally, he comments on the wide legal limits within which authority acts when committing violence, which is significant in the case of the Hong Kong police force. For instance, the authorities can change the guidelines and widen their limits, allowing for abuses. This exact change can be seen in the Hong Kong Police Force guidelines, chapter 29, where the guidelines were changed in September 2019, the middle of the protests, to allow a greater degree of physical punishment. For instance, the original recommended method when dealing with "Defensive Resistance" was that of "Hard Empty Hand Techniques (Palm heel strike/Stunning/Knee strike/Front kick/Angle kick)/Straight arm bar takedown/Transport wrist lock takedown/Iron wrist lock takedown". This method was supplemented by "OC foam/Pepper spray/Tear gas/Tear gas grenades/Pepper balls/Tear gas or smoke emitted by thermal atomiser". What is more, in the case of "Active Aggression" on behalf of protesters, the additional methods include "OC foam/Pepper spray/Tear gas/Tear gas grenades/Pepper balls/Tear gas or smoke emitted by thermal atomiser/Crowd control water cannon (including C.S. chemical agents) Use of extendable baton, rigid fibre rods, rubber bullets, Remington

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 243.

shotgun loaded with rubber bullets or bean bag rounds/Crowd control water cannon vehicles/40 mm riot gun (chemical agent ammunition)".<sup>14</sup>

The increase in the degree of violence perpetrated by authorities comes as a response to increasing opposition from the public, creating a circle of mistrust and use of force. Furthermore, not only does the punishment change, but the situations in which such punishment can be used are also more general and vaguer. For instance, the offense of "Active Aggression", previously defined as "physical assault not intended to cause serious bodily injury", was changed in September to "Physical assault leading to, or *relatively likely to lead to*, bodily harm of others" (emphasis added).<sup>15</sup> The introduction of the possibility of harm grants the police the justification to use heavy, non-lethal methods even when the situation may not require it, proving Benjamin's point that "this is violence for legal ends (it includes the right of disposition), but with the simultaneous authority to decide these ends itself within *wide limits*" (emphasis added).<sup>16</sup>

### The Use of Violence during the Protests

First of all, it is necessary to summarize the timeline of the protests through the lens of abuses of authority, from June 2019 to January 2020. While the civic society mobilized earlier at the beginning of 2019, the first mass rallies began in June, which can be seen as the first instance of clashes between protesters and the police. From the clashes at the Legislative Council to the sieges of the police headquarters, the beginning of the protests showed moderate actions on both sides, despite the police's use of tear gas. It is relevant to note that three deaths mark this period: two of them were marked suicides, while the third presumed suicide, the death of a male protestor falling from Pacific Place, raised suspicions of police involvement. The next relevant incident happened in July, the Yuen Long incident in which a white-dressed mob attacked a group of protesters, together with some civilians in the subway station, bringing a total of around forty-five victims. Despite numerous calls to 999, the emergency hotline, the police arrived more than half an hour too late, leading to accusations among the public that the police

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<sup>14</sup> "The Hong Kong Police Force's guidelines on use of force", *The Washington Post*, Dec 24, 2019, [<https://www.washingtonpost.com/context/read-the-hong-kong-police-force-s-guidelines-on-use-of-force/bd338108-d1df-4e97-88e0-cfc12c5613a1/>], accessed 1 Nov. 2023.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>16</sup> Benjamin, *op. cit.*, p. 242.

supported the mob to harm the protesters. One sign reads “Popo (slang for police) and gangs work together”, as can be seen below:



Image Source: LIHKG

Other than the use of tear gas, rubber rounds, and react rounds, this incident solidified the distrust in the institution. Moreover, in August there were several violent clashes in Wong Tai Sin, Hong Kong Island, and Kowloon. Most noticeable, a young doctor was shot in the eye at Tsim Sha Tsui by the police, which led to protesters' outrage, and their chanting "An eye for an eye" while storming Hong Kong's international airport.<sup>17</sup> By this point, the "Be water" technique of the protesters ensured versatility in their methods, using online means to spread information and real-time updates, covering more territory, and using makeshift equipment and weapons to resist the police's less-lethal ammunition. From June to the end of August, the police

<sup>17</sup> Ryan Ho Kilpatrick, "'An eye for an eye': Hong Kong protests get figurehead in woman injured by police", *The Guardian*, 16 Aug. 2019, [https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/aug/16/an-eye-for-an-eye-hong-kong-protests-get-figurehead-in-woman-injured-by-police], accessed 1 Nov. 2023.



used more than three thousand rounds of tear gas, five hundred rubber bullets, fifty super sock rounds and two hundred and fifty react rounds.

The violence grew exponentially during the rest of the year. From September to January, millions of people partook in the protests and the reaction of the police became disproportionate in terms of the degree of violence employed. The Civil Human Rights Front continued to catalyze the pro-democratic forces and to pressure Chief Executive Carrie Lam to accept the Five Demands, amongst which the independent inquiry into police brutality is significant. To aggravate the situation, several high-profile cases of grave injuries came to light, such as the body of a student being found near Yau Tong, an Indonesian reporter suffering an eye injury in Wan Chai (September); a protester shot in the chest, against the guidelines stating that only areas that are not life-threatening can be shot at, and another one shot in the thigh (October); the death of another student in Tseung Kwan, and a protester shot in his abdomen (November).

The Independent Police Complaint Council's (IPCC) report documents the type and amount of ammunition used during the protests as follows:<sup>18</sup>

Date	Types of ammunition				
	Tear gas	Rubber round	Super Sock round	React round	Live round
June 2019	240	19	3	33	0
July 2019	608	134	3	114	0
August 2019	2 187	405	43	130	3
September 2019	492	348	139	132	1
October 2019	2 848	1 625	386	350	7
November 2019	9 597	7 479	1 425	1 104	8
December 2019	166	66	27	10	0
January 2020	24	9	6	7	0
February 2020	29	15	1	0	0
Total	16 191	10 100	2 033	1 880	19

Table 1. Types of ammunition used during the protests

As can be seen, there is a disproportionate use of violence considering the unprecedented use of ammunition in the history of Hong Kong. More than 16,000 rounds of tear gas were used, many in closed areas, which affected

<sup>18</sup> The IPCC Report, vol. 2, p. 33.

not only the protesters but the locals, including vulnerable citizens. Additionally, more than 10,000 rubber bullets were used against protesters. However, the complaints raised are not limited to physical violence or the use of ammunition. The IPCC Report classifies the allegations into two groups, Reportable Complaints (RCs) and Notifiable Complaints (NCs), defined as:

“RCs are complaints lodged by members of the public directly affected by the alleged conduct of police officers who are either on duty or have identified themselves as police officers while off duty. NCs are complaints which do not meet the criteria to be classified as “RCs”, complaints that are *frivolous or vexatious*, or complaints that are lodged by persons not directly affected by the alleged police conduct which they might have overheard from others, seen or learnt of on the media (emphasis added).”<sup>19</sup>

This division can lead to the neglect of duties, since in some categories the percentage of notifiable complaints surpasses that of reportable complaints, leaving a gap in the accountability shown to the citizens by authorities.

<u>Nature of Allegation</u>	<u>RC (%)</u>	<u>NC (%)</u>	<u>Total (%)</u>
Assault	96 (11.4%)	68 (5.1%)	164 (7.5%)
Unnecessary Use of Authority	73 (8.7%)	175 (13.1%)	248 (11.4%)
Misconduct	276 (32.8%)	529 (39.5%)	805 (36.9%)
Neglect of Duty	209 (24.8%)	354 (26.5%)	563 (25.8%)
Impoliteness	102 (12.1%)	108 (8.1%)	210 (9.6%)
Rudeness	30 (3.6%)	50 (3.7%)	80 (3.7%)
Offensive Language	33 (3.9%)	42 (3.1%)	75 (3.4%)
Threat	18 (2.1%)	4 (0.3%)	22 (1%)
Fabrication of Evidence	5 (0.6%)	8 (0.6%)	13 (0.6%)
Total	842	1 338	2 180

Table 2. The Number and categories of allegations during the protests

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 2.

The Report further analyzes only the reportable complaints, as follows:

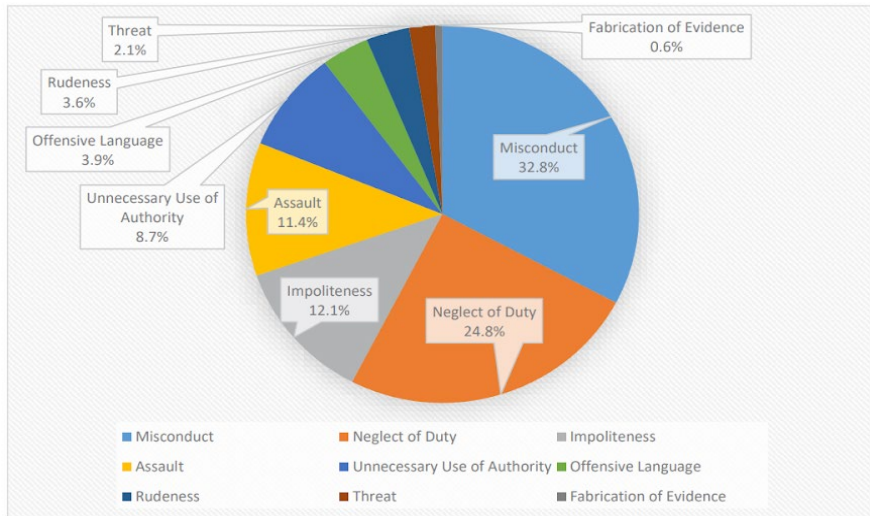


Figure 1: RC allegations by nature<sup>20</sup>

As can be seen in the Report, allegations of either physical or verbal abuse account for the majority of the complaints. The most relevant category reported, that of misconduct, refers to excessive use of force via “hitting, pushing, and pulling of civilians; use of tear gas, use of flashlight/laser pens; use of OC Foam/PAVA Solution; pointing shotguns at civilians; use of handcuffs”, arbitrary detentions, unlawful searches by the police, failure to show identification numbers or insignia, and the threatening of journalists.<sup>21</sup>

It is beyond the scope of this paper to analyze the interaction of the media with the police during the protests. However, there is ample documentation on the restriction of information to the press, the physical and verbal threats, the pepper spraying and showing the reporters’ information to cameras, as well as the incarceration of journalists.<sup>22</sup> It is undeniable that the

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 13.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 13-18.

<sup>22</sup> See Hong Kong Journalists Association, “Joint Statement By Hong Kong Journalists Association And Hong Kong Press Photographers Association: Strongly Condemn The Police And Rally For Attacking Journalists And Reaffirmed That The Fourth Right As Inviolable”, Dec 2019, [<https://www.hkja.org.hk/en/press-release/joint-statement-by-hong-kong-journalists-association-and-hong-kong-press-photographers-association-strongly-condemn-the-police-and-rally-for-attacking-journalists-and-reaffirmed-that-the-fourth-right>].

treatment shown to the independent press grew the resentment and distrust of the civilians towards authorities. This is particularly relevant considering the use of the press by authorities themselves- Carrie Lam's press conferences stressed numerous times the hardships of the police and the hurt suffered by them and their family, while not extending this empathy to the public.<sup>23</sup>

With this picture in mind, the independent inquiry into police brutality is most relevant, particularly as the IPCC, called a "toothless police watchdog" by the press<sup>24</sup>, faces allegations of corruption and proves limited power in assessing the incident.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, the report issued by the IPCC followed Carrie Lam's narrative of portraying the civil society as chaotic and the protesters as violent and unreasonable, leading to further public discontent and radicalization. The language of the report is noteworthy. For instance, it stresses a degree of violence unheard of in the history of the region, stating that: "Outnumbered by the violent protesters, the police officers were violently attacked by the protesters with umbrellas and other objects. The officers were kicked and punched, and hard objects were hurled at them from all directions"<sup>26</sup> or that "a police officer fired a warning shot to save himself from protesters ferociously attacking him".<sup>27</sup> Considering the ammunition used during the conflict, as well as the gear available to the police compared to the protesters' makeshift equipment of umbrellas and masks, one cannot but question the degree of impartiality of the report, given the linguistic choice of describing "ferocious" attacks coming from everyday civilians to the police force.

Additionally, the premises of impartiality angered protesters, showing that authorities targeted dissent in particular from the pro-

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<sup>23</sup> Carrie Lam's Address, "Further Violence not Tolerated", *News.Gov.HK*, 27 Aug 2019, [https://www.news.gov.hk/eng/2019/08/20190827/20190827\_104230\_671.html], accessed 20 Aug. 2023.

<sup>24</sup> Shibani Mahtani, Timothy McLaughlin, Tiffany Liang, and Ryan Ho Kilpatrick, "In Hong Kong crackdown, police repeatedly broke their own rules – and faced no consequences", *The Washington Post*, Dec. 24, 2019, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/world/hong-kong-protests-excessive-force/], accessed 1 Nov. 2023.

<sup>25</sup> "415610 Hong Kong 2022 Human Rights Report", *US Department of State*, 2022, pp. 4-7, [https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/china-includes-hong-kong-macau-and-tibet/415610\_hong-kong-2022-human-rights-report/], accessed 10 Sep. 2023.

<sup>26</sup> The IPCC Report, vol. 1, p. 65.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 153.

democratic side: "The Police has reiterated that the Force is politically neutral and treats everyone equally and impartially, regardless of background or identity".<sup>28</sup> Other statements from the report, such as those relating to the use of ammunition and violence, further antagonized the public. By stating that "it is observed that police officers had exercised restraint in the use of firearms"<sup>29</sup>, the IPCC further minimizes the damage suffered by the protesters, and contradicts other independent assessments.<sup>30</sup>

### **The Public's Reactions to Police Action during the Protests**

After examining both the theoretical framework through which authorities monopolize the use of violence and the police allegations of overstepping their guidelines on using force, it is necessary to evaluate Hongkongers' reaction to the events. With this purpose in mind, ninety statements from X, formerly known as Twitter, are investigated.<sup>31</sup> It is well known that Hongkongers used social media to express their dissatisfaction with the Chief Executive and the police, and their activity on X proved their dissatisfaction with the violence and the defective management of the people's grievances. The vast majority of the statements are critical of how the police conducted its operations during the protests, both on an individual and institutional level, as well as condemning the IPCC report for its lack of impartiality.

First of all, the public overwhelmingly condemns the excessive use of force and the disregard for the police guidelines on an individual level. One of the most common slogans during the conflict is "The police know the law, but break it", which can be found in their online statements. Some common denominators for the statements are the usage of words such as "enemy, terrorist, murderer, most hated, gangsters, rubbish" for describing the

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*, vol. 3, p. 85.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*, vol. 2, p. 32.

<sup>30</sup> See Shibani's (2019) article in which Hyeyoung Lim, a criminal justice professor at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, comments on an instance where an officer fired targeting three protesters on November 11, 2019: "Even if I assume something happened prior to the scene that may raise the officer's adrenaline level, it is obvious that the officer failed to control his feelings".

<sup>31</sup> To ensure data confidentiality and identity privacy, the protesters' names are not revealed, only their statements from the second half of 2019 are analyzed. For the full archive of the statements, please contact the author of the paper. Moreover, the original text has not been modified, allowing for possible writing mistakes.

police. One Hongkonger commented: "Joke of today: Police were using minimum level of force #disbandhkpolice #FiveDemandsNotOneLess", showing distrust regarding the excessive use of force. Others commented on officers ignoring the guidelines and inflicting damage in lethal areas: "#hkpolicebrutality HKPF hit the protestor's head intentionally. This is unnecessary. HKPF just release their anger and stress on protestors", and "#HongKongPolice are the murderers who aim at the children's head. They don't care about the rules of using force. #hongkongpolicebrutality". This is a point of contention, as several videos circulated on X of police brutality and hitting the heads of protesters, which is against guidelines, as a Hongkonger comments: "The HK Police commits war crime. Their strategy is to crush the necks or hit the heads of the arrestees in order to inflict the most life-threatening damages. Must condemn HK Police! #HKPoliceTerrorism #hkpolicebrutality #FreeHongKong."

Another point of criticism is that of indiscriminately targeting vulnerable people, such as children: "The legal system has been completely vanished, no more justice in #HongKong. An unarmed 15-year-old kid being shot by red bullet and the cop has not been prosecuted. All protesters are willing to bear the legal liability, but what about the cops? They are under govt's shelter!". Furthermore, on a video of an officer hitting a protestor who did not try to resist, one commentator said: "No need to doubt, this is happening in every single peaceful or so-called 'violent' protest and parade. HK police has no bottom line and will hit you till you are dead. #hkpolicebrutality #PoliceBrutality #PoliceState #PoliceTerrorism."

Secondly, dissatisfaction goes beyond individual officers and moves into criticism of the governing bodies on the institutional level, particularly focusing on the role of the Chief Executive and its relation with Beijing. This connection is shown in a post stating "#HKPolice are a group of criminals and murderers, in bed with tyrants. #hkpolicebrutality is madness...please #StandWithHongKong #HKPoliceState", the tyrants referring to the mainland government. Another post comments on the intervention of the Chinese Communist Party in brutally crushing the protests, stating that "#CCP maintains dictatorship by restrict citizens from free speech. Surveillance, censor media to control info & propaganda. HK puppet Govt. & police put citizens freedom & justice aside, obey only #CCP order to intimidate ppl of HK & the world". Other commentators draw a link between the Hong Kong police force and the People's Liberation Army, stating that "Hk police or

PLA disguised as popo, both r trying to kill protestor". This idea of questioning the legitimacy of the Executive Council is ever-present; one commentator states that "Shameless hk popo's sole duty is to protect the illegitimate hk government brutally". This brutality relates to Benjamin's theory on the validity of violence: it is a right of the state, and it is used to create and reinforce the status quo.

Moreover, another common theme encountered in the posts is the police's treatment of the press, with commentators stating that these abuses can happen because the press is weakened, as a strong investigation presence can show the corruption stemming from the government to the rest of the institutions. The intimidation mentioned above and even physical violence targeted at the press is conspicuous, as one statement shows that "The #HKPoliceState can do whatever they want to the #Hongkongers when they get rid of the press. #StandWithHongKong". What is more, another statement shows the relation between the existence of the free press and the public's attitude towards the police: "The police know they are hated by many citizens. But they won't understand the reasons behind. They only think it's a plot of the press to defame them. This explains why they obstruct and attack the press so often."

The third and last relevant element common throughout the statements is the lack of trust in the capacities of the IPCC to handle the brutality investigation. One commenter writes: "The HKIPCC is dominated by people with certain political backgrounds, it has neither the political will nor the legal power to investigate allegations of police violence or other misconduct. An independent inquiry into the handling of the #HongKongProtests is urgently needed." This attitude proves to be pervasive in the rest of the statements, as many stress the lack of impartiality in the IPCC, as well as its lack of authority to sanction the abuses. Another similar point is raised in this post: "There're shortfalls in powers, capacity & independent investigative capability. The operative word here is independent. Even if IPCC's "structural limitations" were removed (powers) & more staff/support given (capacity), it still can't be trusted if not truly independent". Lastly, one Hongkonger mentions the connection between Carrie Lam's cabinet and the actions of the CCP, stating that there cannot be a true investigation while Hong Kong is dependent on the decisions of Beijing: "We're afraid IPCC is unable to act effectively. As long as rule of law can't be restored, or HK legal system is still under control by CCP, HKPF won't be sanctioned. This also explain why #hongkongpolicebrutality is getting more serious."

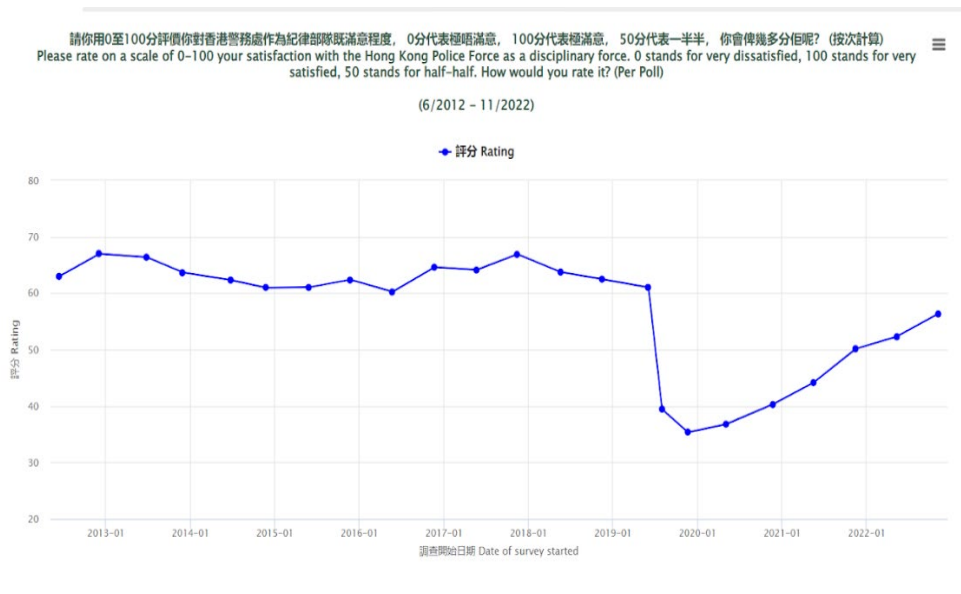


Figure 2. Survey on the public's satisfaction with the police<sup>32</sup>

The interpretation of these statements is supported by data from the *Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute* on the public's satisfaction with the police. The graphic below shows a staggering fall in the people's opinion, going from 62.5% before the protests to 35.3% in November 2019. It is noteworthy that after the passing of the National Security Law and, consequently, the end of protests, the satisfaction levels have yet not risen to pre-2019 levels.

## Conclusions

By analyzing the three sections of data, it can be assessed that the actions of the Police Force during the protests led to radicalization and the increase of violence amongst protesters, as well as to the general distrust of the public towards this institution, the local government and the one in Beijing. The first part of the paper discussed Benjamin's theory on the

<sup>32</sup> "Hong Kong Police Force", HKPORI, 2022, [<https://www.pori.hk/pop-poll/disciplinary-force-en/x001.html?lang=en>], Accessed 5 Nov. 2023.



purpose of violence as a political tool, showing that the state creates a monopoly on violence, rendering it inaccessible to protesters. Moreover, violence manifests in the police institution as both law-preserving, by defending the status quo from democratic requests, but also law-making, by creating a new power dynamic between itself and the public. Furthermore, the second part of the paper showed the protests unfolding, together with the episodes of violence, such as using pepper spray in closed spaces, harming both civilians and protesters alike, ignoring the guidelines on the use of violence, and hitting sensitive areas such as the head of protesters or shooting them in the abdomen, as well as the alleged collusion with local gangs, and the targeting and intimidation of the press. In these cases, the assessment of the IPCC report proved unsatisfactory by adopting the Chief Executive's narrative of blaming the protesters for being irrationally violent and chaotic. Lastly, the third part of the paper focused on Hongkongers' reactions to the events by analyzing ninety statements posted on X. Some common themes of the posts included criticism of the authorities for mishandling the protests and their ties to the mainland government, dissatisfaction with the institution of the police and its correlation with the PLA, as well as the criticism of the excessive force employed by officers. Based on these data, it can be argued that the mismanagement of the police and the excessive use of force led to the escalation of the conflict, and the lack of independent investigations resulted in high rates of mistrust in both the government and the police.

There is further research to be conducted on the institution of the police and its transformation after the passing of the National Security Law. Considering Benjamin's emphasis on the role of violence for security reasons, China's concerns with national security are predictable. Therefore, further violence is expected in the mainland's quest to ensure the reintegration of its historical territories, not limited to Hong Kong, but covering Macau, Taiwan, and the South China Sea.

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