Coping with international politics: A case study of Hong Kong

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Abstract

The way that leaders and citizens cope with stress is under-theorised in the study of International Relations (IR). This article anchors psychological studies on coping to the literature theorising emotions in IR to clarify two unaddressed questions: (1) how do political actors – individuals and collectives – cope with both sudden crises and long-term change?; and (2) in the context of international politics, whose coping matters, and under what conditions? Our coping framework demonstrates that intersubjective appraisal of urgency from everyday stressors triggers a process that elevates individual coping to the collective level. Circulation of coping responses, a key but neglected process of scaling up, binds individuals to affective communities. Our theoretical contribution is an innovative coping framework to explore how individual pursuit of well-being is transformed into collective agency. The methodological novelty is the triangulation of emotional representation with survey data and in-depth interviews to capture the circulation of coping responses. We illustrate our conceptual framework with the overlooked case of Hong Kong. Our findings suggest coping constitutes conditions of political possibilities, in that individual Hong Kongers’ efforts to sustain emotional well-being are aggregated to create momentum for a state-building project unexpected by the former British colonisers or the Chinese Communist Party.

Keywords: affective communities; China; coping; emotions in IR; Hong Kong; localism

Introduction

The inevitability and omnipresence of stress requires coping to ensure individual health and social functioning.\(^1\) National leaders must cope with stress and deal with the negative emotions triggered by uncertainty of conflict, economic crises, natural disasters, or pandemics in the process of policymaking. The public tends to be on the receiving end of both the stressful situations generated by international politics and its leaders’ attempts to cope.

The discipline of International Relations (IR) recognises the centrality of stress. However, how people cope with the exigencies of international politics is under-theorised. How do political actors, individual decision-makers, and collectives cope with both sudden crisis and long-term change? Furthermore, considering political decisions or collective reactions to stress in international politics, whose coping matters, and under what circumstances?

This article provides an innovative theoretical framework of coping to answer these important and unaddressed questions by anchoring psychological studies on coping mechanisms to the

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literature on theorisation of emotions in IR. We argue that intersubjective appraisal of urgency from everyday stressors induced by powerful political forces triggers a process that requires individual coping. How individuals deal with stress follows the logic of emotional balancing. This matters under conditions in which emotional well-being orders us to challenge established political arrangements. Through circulation of coping responses, individual coping is scaled up to collective coping, resulting in the formation of affective communities and transforming individual stress responses into collective agency.

The main literature to which this article contributes is the theorisation of emotions in IR. First, it teases out a therapeutic approach within the emotional turn of IR to establish the relevance of emotional well-being for international politics. Secondly, by answering whose coping matters in IR, the authors posit that coping processes constitute conditions for political possibilities, and that individuals’ coping with stress is imbued with collective dynamics and implications. Lastly and relatedly, the coping framework this article proposes contributes to the discussion of levelling up emotional experiences. Primarily, this work adds circulation of coping responses to the existing scaling-up pathways and further conceptualises the emergent collective, what Hutchison called ‘affective communities’, in which individuals are bound by emotional understandings of the stressor and the need to cope together.

In addition to the theoretical contribution, this paper presents an empirical contribution through its choice of an overlooked case study: Hong Kong’s state-building process. The possibility of independence for Hong Kong was erased in 1972 by the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in the General Assembly of the United Nations, when the PRC and the United Kingdom (UK) determined Hong Kong’s future as a Chinese Special Administrative Region in the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration. The political compromise between the former British coloniser and the current sovereign master residing in Beijing interweaves the bilateral agreement with the need to cope by Hong Kong residents. This is epitomised in the words of Deng Xiaoping, who said that the Sino-British negotiations in the 1980s would ‘put hearts at ease’. The founding of the Hong Kong National Party and the fact that 40 per cent of surveyed Hong Kongers did not rule out the idea of independence shows the failure of the British and Chinese governments to put Hong Kongers’ hearts at ease. On the collective level, Hong Kong illuminates the sub-national level’s discontent and disagreement with the imposition of national identity by a powerful sovereign.

Using primary data from surveys and 80 interviews collected in the span of eight years, our findings provide a rare documentation of Hong Kongers’ efforts to sustain emotional well-being through a state-building project in defiance of an international treaty. The story of Hong Kong is not only intrinsically international, but also emotional, because it shows how ‘seemingly small-scale emotional interactions can become amplified into globally visible assemblages’.

Theorising coping in IR

The theory section first charts IR’s existing interest in coping, namely political psychology and ontological security. There is consensus in these two literatures that coping constitutes conditions of political possibilities, but they diverge on the unit of analysis: political psychology is primarily concerned with individual coping, while ontological security accentuates collective coping. This divergence points towards two unaddressed yet critical questions: how do individuals and collectives cope with stressful situations, and whose coping matters under what circumstances.

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1 Emma Hutchison, Affective Communities in World Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).
This article’s engagement with the main literature, theorising emotions in IR, sheds light on the therapeutic approach, which notices the relevance of individuals’ emotional well-being to the configuration of global politics. Pinpointing the scaling-up process from individual to collective coping, the authors add the circulation of coping responses as an additional pathway for collective affective experience. The consequence of collective coping is the formation of Hutchison’s affective communities, which bind individuals with emotional representations and understandings. Affective community’s relevance to the coping framework resides in its ability to capture the transnational dimension of local experiences.

The constitutive relationship between coping and international politics

The existing IR literature acknowledges the omnipresence of coping in various units of analysis. Focusing on the individual decision-making process, foreign-policy makers need to ‘cope’ with perceived threats. When it comes to state identities, states cope with negative treatment, such as stigmatisation. The international community is also expected to ‘cope’ with rising powers such as China. The act of coping is political, yet coping is largely treated as an empty verb that requires no further theorisation. For instance, the statement that foreign-policy makers ‘cope’ with perceived threats is more concerned with the perception of threat rather than how the process of dealing with threats can generate those perceptions.

A rare exception that examines coping in IR is the stress-coping-choice model in political psychology. Brecher locates coping mechanisms in a causal chain to explain individual and/or group decision-making. Coping is considered as an intervening variable that mediates the causal relations between the perception of stress and political decisions. The political consequence of coping is to identify and invent ‘alternative options’ that inform the final policy outcome.

Not only is coping relevant for the decision-making process, but the research community on ontological security also recognises the constitutive relationship between coping and state identities and behaviours. Coping mechanisms such as routine, avoidance, and resort to humour are extracted as key to ontological security-seeking behaviours. Situating anxiety and uncertainty management at the heart of security studies, Mitzen highlights that different modes of anxiety management generate varying outcomes.

These two distinctive research communities converge in the acknowledgment that the coping process constitutes conditions of political possibilities in the form of alternative narratives about state identities and policies pursued by national leaders. However, the literature on the psychology of coping, introduced by Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman, is missed by political psychology's

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14 Mitzen, ‘Ontological security in world politics.’
focus on the psychology of emotions and ontological security’s primary preference of the sociology of emotional management.¹⁵

A re-routing of coping in IR to the psychological research on coping helps clarify two unaddressed questions: first, how do individuals and collectives cope with stressful situations, be it sudden crisis or slow-burning political change? This is an important question because individuals cope for their psychological and physiological well-being,¹⁶ so the extrapolation of coping to the state level could be problematic, as states do not have a ‘body’ to experience stress and do not feel the need to cope. Relatedly, the second question concerns whose coping matters in international politics, and under what circumstances individual coping generates collective dynamics.

Problem- and emotion-focused coping

This paper consults Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman’s groundbreaking works on coping in psychology to clarify the constitutive relationship between individual coping and conditions of political possibilities in IR. Lazarus and Folkman define coping as ‘constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person’.¹⁷ The function of coping is more than the seeking and evaluation of information, as compellingly outlined by Brecher in the above-mentioned stress-coping-choice model. More importantly, it is about the restoration and maintenance of equilibrium under stress,¹⁸ which broadens the scope of coping as understood in ontological security from repression of negative emotions to balancing affective experiences.

Folkman categorises two types of coping based on its function: problem-focused and emotion-focused.¹⁹ Problem-focused coping refers to the management and alteration of the problem. In Brecher’s model, this involves information search and absorption, consultation, discussion forums, and the consideration of alternatives in times of crisis.²⁰ Emotion-focused coping, on the other hand, is ‘directed at managing or reducing emotional distress’.²¹ Mitzen’s conceptualisation of anxiety avoidance by the European Union in confronting its colonial past and war memories epitomises the emotion-focused coping process.²² Adler-Nissen and Tsinovoi’s compelling analysis of humour as a coping mechanism is another example of emotion-focused coping to handle international misrecognition.²³ The definitional differentiation does not suggest incompatibility of problem- and emotion-focused coping. Rituals, for instance, both calm emotional distress²⁴ and reframe ‘past suffering’ to solve problems.²⁵

The differentiation of problem- and emotion-focused coping in psychology bears direct relevance to IR for three reasons. First, it offers a framework to trace the constitutive relationship

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¹⁵ Regarding the preference of sociology in ontological security literature, see Zarakol, ‘Ontological (in)security’, p. 6.
²² Mitzen, ‘Anxious community’.
²³ Adler-Nissen and Tsinovoi, ‘International misrecognition’.
between coping and conditions of political possibilities. Second, emotion-focused coping pinpoints the missing micro-level actorhood of anxiety management in the ontological security literature. Third, emotion-focused coping foregrounds the overlooked logic of emotional equilibrium in shaping individual decisions and collective agency. The underpinning logic of coping is achieving an emotional equilibrium.26 Stress disrupts individual emotional balance and requires readjustment.27 Failure to balance emotions is a matter of mental health and generates physiological repercussions.28 Psychological defence mechanisms amend an individual’s experience of emotions through ‘internal control structures’, which alter the perceived reality.29 This means the logic of emotional equilibrium may override the choices motivated by strategic calculations.

Our working definition of coping in the IR context is a cognitive and behavioural adaptation, automatic or conscious, to manage objectively stressful or subjectively unbearable situations. Mapping political psychology and ontological security to the psychological typology of coping creates a false one-to-one relationship that aligns individual coping with the problem-focused and collective coping with the emotion-focused. Our engagement with psychology is not to parachute ‘the psychology of emotions’ into IR that applies ‘emotional categories’ to world politics.30 Instead, we are interested in how we think about coping in International Relations.

The therapeutic approach in theorising emotions in IR

We anchor our theory of coping to the literature on emotions in IR, originating with Crawford’s seminal article, which ushered an ‘emotional turn’ into the discipline. Yet her legacy in pointing out the significance of individuals’ emotional well-being to international politics has so far been less appreciated. With the ‘emotional turn’ of IR comes a ‘therapeutic’ approach that appreciates an individual’s emotional well-being in the grand process of international politics. This body of literature is sensitive to the two questions mentioned above.

The question of how subjects cope with stress echoes the debate on the role of the body in emotions IR literature, between ‘bodily based micro approaches’ and macro approaches that foreground social, cultural, spiritual, and normative dimensions of emotion.31 McDermott’s somatic account grounds emotional experiences in the physicality of bodies, recognising ‘the primacy of the physical body in both experiencing and conveying emotions’.32 Whereas it is contestable whether the primacy of bodies should be reflected in the definition of emotions, the somatic approach aligns with the psychology of coping and pays more attention on the physiological aspect of individuals’ emotional well-being. Individuals need to cope, and the body is where coping as a psychological process begins.

The centrality of individual emotional well-being in our coping framework does not turn a blind eye to the social and cultural characters of emotions. Individual coping is inherently a social and cultural process in which individuals become interdependent through common goals.33 Structural

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30 Ross, Mixed Emotions, p. 17.
discrimination ... and collective disadvantages' are also 'important contextual demands with which people cope'. Therefore, individual coping matters to international politics under conditions in which our emotional well-being orders us to challenge established political arrangements that require conformity to rules and norms. How we feel in reaction to political events may be subject to culturally and socially specific scripts. However, how we deal with emotions follows a different script, one of emotional balancing and equilibrium. Evidence from affective neuroscience shows a 'pre-social, pre-discursive' dimensions of affect. The counter-entropic neural disposition generates a 'defensive understanding of selfhood' that prioritises the attainment of 'emotional quiescence' over seeking perfect knowledge.

On the premise that 'individuals are activists on behalf of their own well-being', our emotional well-being may order us to confront rules and norms and withdraw us from emotional labour when emotions are managed, not necessarily balanced. The difference between managing and balancing emotions lies in the relationship between the self and external environment. When we manage emotions, we regulate ourselves to fit in specific circumstances – for example, we force a smile and create narratives to keep our job and maintain sanity. Yet when we balance emotions, we negotiate with the wider environment, and radical changes are possible. Those moments are 'emotional ruptures' that set up alternative political options.

This brings us to the 'therapeutic' approach within the theorisation of emotions in IR. Emotional responses, according to Crawford, are partly based on individuals' appraisal of 'an event's significance for their well-being'. The political consequence is political elites' tendency to distort past events and decisions to 'feel good about' their choices. This is an important intervention to revisit the instrumentalist take that treats leaders as deliberate and strategic players 'inherently capable of rising above the emotions of the masses' – not to mention that unintentionally transmitted affective information may undermine orchestrated strategic communication in high politics.

Individuals' neural dynamics of emotions and regulation also have collective implications, particularly when it comes to emotional attachments. In the context of trauma, collective narratives that help individuals 'heal the wounds of the past' are vital for societies and groups to build peaceful relationships with others. Hutchison speaks of the concept of 'working through' to conceptualise how communities make cognitive and emotional sense of communal trauma. Different from 'moving on,' working through trauma is simultaneously therapeutic and an 'active political process' in which communities engage with suffering and memories 'in a way that prompts a questioning of

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37Gammon, 'Affective neuroscience', p. 207.


41Hutchison, *Affective Communities in World Politics*, p. 19.


43Crawford, 'Passion of world politics', p. 142.

44Ross, *Mixed Emotions*.


46Gammon, 'Affective neuroscience', p. 213.

the very mindsets and structures (of power). This position poses a direct question to ontological security’s state-centric inclination by probing whose anxiety deserves narratives of the sense of self, which leads to the next section.

**Distributive politics of individual coping**

The question of whose coping matters to IR concerns the distributive aspect of individual coping. We intuitively understand that individual coping by leaders in eminent positions has major consequences for international politics, yet the emotional well-being of ordinary citizens also has the potential for global ramifications. This is illustrated by the Fridays for Future movement, which originated from the individual coping responses to depression and climate anxiety by a Swedish teenager. Yet even when the urgency is obvious and when facing a similar stressor such as a terrorist attack, coping responses can vary significantly. In 2001, George W. Bush produced visibly different enemy narratives and security measures from the Spanish public’s emotional response to the train bombings in 2004, which resulted in demonstrations and ‘absence of public hostility toward ... the Muslim minority’. These examples showcase our position that both leaders’ and the citizenry’s coping matters and may generate different political outcomes.

The examples also illustrate that, both the exigency of a stressor and its relevance which prompt coping responses, are negotiated. Our coping framework covers the overlooked situation of a slow-burning crisis in which urgency is intersubjectively agreed, instead of objectively imposed. An example of intersubjective urgency can be observed in the storming of the US Capitol in January 2021. Then-President Trump manufactured a stressor – electoral fraud and claims that the 2020 election had been stolen – evoking negative emotions such as anger and fear among his supporters. Trump subsequently offered emotional balancing through problem-focused coping by calling them to attend a protest in Washington. The scaling up from individual to collective coping has the potential to encourage ‘strategic political behaviours’ in which leaders capitalise on the need to cope. How leaders cope with stress is nevertheless not automatically translated into collective coping. In fact, collective coping requires individuals to ‘enlist the assistance of ingroup others in a way that maintains sensitivity towards the wellbeing of those others.’

**From individual to collective coping**

Scaling up from individual coping to the collective level takes place via representation to ‘establish the emotional fabric that binds people together’. The levelling up of emotions can be unintentional, as in the case of ‘emotional contagion’, which is an automatic process. It can also be intentional and strategic by matching political strategies with others’ affective states (calibration), eliciting emotive responses for political gains (manipulation), modifying the ‘underlying structure of affective dispositions and concerns’ (cultivation), and performing an emotional display to influence the audience (display).

Our approach aims in the direction of representation and interpretative methods but takes a slightly different route by exploring the possibility of self-representation. A quick detour to Lazarus’s differentiation between primary and secondary appraisal helps us to illuminate what is

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48 Hutchison, *Affective Communities in World Politics*, p. 245.
50 Ross, *Mixed Emotions*, pp. 89.
represented, shared, and circulated when coping is projected from the individual to the collective
level. Primary appraisal concerns individuals’ interpretation of the relevance of given circum-
stances. Secondary appraisal refers to individuals’ ‘options and prospects for coping’. Interviews,
questionnaires, and focus groups are conducted to collect individuals’ interpretations. Reflections
from individuals and self-reported narratives, utilised in psychology research, may help literature
on emotions in IR narrow the existing ‘gap between a representation and what is represented
therewith’.

Individual coping is levelled up through circulation of coping responses, rather than emotional
states. Three pathways, outlined by Hall and Ross, clarify directions of scaling up. It can be a
top-down process driven by political elites, such as Donald Trump’s Capitol Hill storming. The
bottom-up process is also relevant when individuals enlist social assistance as coping resources, as
in the case of Greta Thunberg. Horizontal circulation of a sense of urgency and the need to cope
provide moments to transform an individual’s effort to maintain emotional well-being into collective
action, such as the Spanish public’s response to the Madrid train bombings. Coping responses circulate
(but are not always copied directly) and offer additional resources for individuals that later form their coping repertoires. This intervention therefore adds coping responses and narratives to Hall and Ross’s checklist of what is shared and circulated. Circulation of coping responses imbues individuals’ emotional balancing with collective dynamics. Scaling up occurs as coping responses are circulated and shared to address a common stressor, elevating individual coping to collective coping. Alongside the cognitive and behavioural adaptations emerges what Hutchison theorises as ‘affective communities’. Through representation, individuals are not only bound ‘by shared emotional understanding’ of the stressor, but also the need for collective coping. Affective communities as a concept is emancipatory because it provides sites to appreciate the weaving of emotional meaning for communities beyond nation-states. In this sense, affective communities are the outcome of collective coping and a manifestation of collective agency, as individuals’ dealing with stress is reappraised as part of a bigger political reconfiguration.

This article proposes a coping framework in which intersubjective appraisal of urgency from everyday stressors triggers the levelling up from individual coping to the collective level. Circulation of coping responses, problem-focused and/or emotion-focused, binds individuals to affective communities. Our theoretical contribution identifies a therapeutic approach within the ‘emotional turn’ of IR, and we use the innovative coping framework to explore how individual well-being is transformed into collective agency. Our conceptual framework of coping contributes to the therapeutic turn by providing a much-needed vocabulary and pinpoints mechanisms of ‘working through’ and ‘moving through’ stressful situations. By doing this, we demonstrate that not only are emotions constitutive of global politics, but also that dealing with emotions engenders conditions for creativity in IR.

Methodological note
Coping research relies on self-reported information to capture and measure coping strategies and their effectiveness through interviews, questionnaires, and focus groups. The introduction

60Hutchison, Affective Communities in World Politics, pp. 3–4.
of coping to International Relations therefore offers important methodological challenges and opportunities. The main question lies in the ontological compatibility of self-reported affective experiences, as emotions are intrinsically social. Instead, emotions are examined via representation and communication and through discourse. The communicative process is highlighted, as emotional expression is mediated and regulated.

Yet treating self-reported information from individuals as narratives offers a methodological opportunity to link affective IR and psychology approaches. Although an individual’s narrative does not allow researchers to ‘get inside the[ir] head’, their stories provide valuable indirect insights into how they ‘make sense of emotional experience and imbue it with meaning.’ Furthermore, it may contribute to the debate about agency in the study of political emotions by carving out an interpretive space for local agents.

Our research design echoes Holmes’s advocacy of a ‘triangulation of methods’ to study emotions. The motivation of our research design is the recognition of the power dynamics between researchers and the agents we study. The triangulation allows us to identify affective experiences, trace how they are coped with, and understand how and why certain emotions are communicated. As coping processes entail both individual and collective levels, this study may provide new ideas to address the challenge of capturing the ‘scaling-up’ process at the intersection between individual emotions and affective dynamics.

We adhere to the established practice in the field of using a case study. Our case study is the mainstreaming of the Hong Kong independence issue, which showcases the political consequence of coping. Our empirical investigation involves self-reported information via surveys and open-ended interviews to invite our respondents to reconstruct their emotional landscape and examine the coping process on the individual level. Respondents’ accounts of the everyday are essential to understanding how stress is experienced and subsequently dealt with. We distributed a survey to 60 localist leaders in Hong Kong and received 32 valid responses (response rate = 53.3%). Questions in the survey were open-ended and invited respondents to offer their own narrative of their affective experiences. The survey was limited to studying patterns rather than explaining the emergence and evolution of emotions. Findings from our survey were closely monitored and followed up by interviews. We contacted all groups that fit a broad definition of localism. Between 2012 and 2020, we conducted 80 in-depth interviews, in English, Mandarin, or Cantonese, with 60 localist leaders (response rate = 97%). In the interviews, we initially let localist leaders freely share the process of their political awakening before steering them towards their


Lazarus, ‘Emotions and interpersonal relationships’.


See, for examples, Hall and Ross, ‘Affective politics after 9/11’; Hutchison, *Affective Communities in World Politics*.

Localists are the only group that openly advocated for Hong Kong independence.

Bleiker and Hutchison, ‘Emotions and world politics’, p. 122.
understanding of the impact of major events on their emotional situation. The interviews sought to establish a nuanced analysis of how leaders have coped with disruptions to their emotional equilibrium and how they communicated coping strategies to their followers. We re-interviewed several leaders over the years. Our longitudinal study allowed us to gain trust and access to leaders’ reflections of their affective experiences and explanation of their coping process. Due to the political sensitivities of the topic of Hong Kong independence, we decided to anonymise all interviewees.

Our methodological contribution, in this sense, is to return agency to research subjects. The final methodological element focuses on emotion representation: a content analysis of all social media posts by 47 localist leaders shared during the first 48 hours of the 2014 Sunflower Movement in Taiwan. Data was collected from public and private (friends/supporters) Facebook posts of leaders. Our interviews confirmed that all localist leaders use the social media platform Facebook as their primary and often only tool to disseminate information, communicate with the public, and mobilise supporters. Content analysis examined the symbolic qualities of texts through ‘qualitative interpretation’ in which the researchers’ voice participates in the dialogue with research subjects. We triangulated the self-reflected emotions of political leaders with those communicated and represented through their words and images.

Findings
The idea of Hong Kong independence is not a cognitive novelty, but for decades, it was confined to sporadic op-eds and demands by isolated local elites. Indeed, independence was not even the aim of Hong Kong’s student movement in the early 1970s, unlike other anti-colonial movements in Asia. After the transfer of sovereignty from the British to the Chinese, independence was treated as political taboo: intellectually available, but normatively unacceptable because of its challenge to PRC sovereignty over Hong Kong. Anyone openly advocating for Hong Kong independence was seen as ‘secessionist’ by the Chinese government and as a ‘radical’ by the political establishment in Hong Kong.

After 1997, Hong Kong retained its own political and economic system under the ‘One Country, Two Systems’ framework. The pro-democracy movement focused on safeguarding Hong Kong’s high degree of autonomy as guaranteed in the mini-constitution. For decades, the main political cleavage in the territory between the pan-democratic camp and the pro-establishment (or pro-Beijing) camp was the speed of democratisation and realisation of universal suffrage. The most daring challenge to the regime in Beijing was a year-long civil disobedience campaign to pressure the Chinese government for democratic changes to the Hong Kong electoral system. Neither the pan-democrats nor the pro-Beijing camp ever questioned that Hong Kong was a part of China, rendering the option of independence a non-issue.

It was not until the localist movement in the 2010s that the issue of Hong Kong independence was openly advanced. The challenge to the status quo and critique of existing political camps

74For a more systematic examination of the Hong Kong independence movement, see Kevin Carrico, Two Systems, Two Countries: A Nationalist Guide to Hong Kong (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2022); Suzanne Pepper, Keeping Democracy at Bay: Hong Kong and the Challenge of Chinese Political Reform (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007).
75Stephan Ortmann, ‘Hong Kong: Problems of identity and independence’, in Meredith Leigh Weiss and Edward Aspinall (eds), Student Activism in Asia: Between Protest and Powerlessness (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), pp. 79–100 (p. 84).
78The campaign was initiated by a group of academics who envisioned a radical but rational and peaceful movement, ‘Occupy Central with Love and Peace’, with escalating actions of civil disobedience.
79See, for example, Sebastian Veg, ‘The rise of “localism” and civic identity in post-handover Hong Kong: Questioning the Chinese nation-state’, The China Quarterly, 230 (2017), pp. 323–47; Malte Philipp Kaeding, ‘The rise of “localism” in Hong
defined localism as the ‘third force’ in Hong Kong’s political landscape. Initial theory building on localism envisioned Hong Kong as a city-state, undermining the sovereignty claimed by the PRC over Hong Kong. A further step was taken with the creation of the Hong Kong National Party in 2016, which organised the first ever independence rally that attracted 10,000 people. Expressions of ‘independence’ and the ‘Hong Kong nation’ subsequently entered the political establishment when localists referenced them during their oath-taking ceremony in the city’s legislature. Within a very short time, the idea of Hong Kong independence was mainstreamed. Here, mainstreaming is defined as a discourse quickly shifting from marginal circles ‘to more central ones, shifting what is deemed to be acceptable or legitimate in political, media and public circles and contexts’. Hong Kong independence was extensively debated in the media. The term ‘Hong Kong independence’ in Hong Kong’s seven best-selling newspapers increased by 1,380 per cent between 2011 and 2016 (from 90 mentions in 2011 to 1,332 in 2016). Up to one-fifth of the population now supports Hong Kong independence, testifying to considerable public support. Political groups advocating independence performed so well in elections that they pushed individuals and groups across the localist spectrum to take a clearer position on Hong Kong’s future and to support self-determination. The sudden popularisation of independence was a remarkable achievement in comparative perspective, given the historical legacies, as well as political and geo-strategic realities, making it an unexpected political choice to the ruling elites both in Beijing and Hong Kong.

**Intersubjectivity of urgency: Interpreting mainlandisation as an essential threat**

Mainlandisation refers to the accelerated socio-economic integration with the mainland. In particular, Hong Kongers felt overtaken by the mass tourism and immigration from China. The new Chinese arrivals were perceived to be instruments in a strategic plan of the Chinese government to change Hong Kong into a mainland city.

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80 Chin Wan, *On Hong Kong As A City State* (Hong Kong: Enrich Publishing, 2011).
81 Kaeding, ‘Rise of localism in Hong Kong’, p. 166.
82 Kaeding, ‘Rise of localism in Hong Kong’, p. 166.
87 Interview with left-wing localist lawmaker and activist, 2017, Hong Kong.
88 It is worth noting that it took the Scottish National Party several decades to get similar support rates for Scottish independence. Lindsay Paterson, ‘Education and support for Scottish independence, 1979–2016’, *Journal of Education Policy*, 38:3 (2023), pp. 1–22.
89 Lo Sonny Shiu-hing, *The Dynamics of Beijing–Hong Kong Relations: A Model for Taiwan?* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008).
90 Interview with localist theorist, 2017, Hong Kong.
The Hong Kong government admitted that the ‘actual impact on the livelihood of the community’, particularly in densely populated neighbourhoods and the stretched transport facilities ‘exceeded the public’s psychological acceptability’.\(^9^1\)

The stressor of mainlandisation generated negative emotions such as anger, fear, contempt, and despair. Our interview data shows that a series of low-intensity emotional encounters accumulated into a widely recognised stressful situation in which Hong Kong was perceived to face an existential threat.\(^9^2\) The Hong Kong government’s inaction fuelled the feeling that China was a new ‘coloniser’ in Hong Kong.\(^9^3\) The combination of everyday stress and the lack of response from the authorities induced a high level of frustration and fear.\(^9^5\) Mainlandisation was experienced as a question of ‘life and death’.\(^9^6\)

Fear amplifies the intensity of everyday stress through the associated sense of lacking control.\(^9^7\) Thus, despite its weak action tendency, fear disrupts individuals’ emotional equilibrium, triggering the coping process as a way of self-protection.\(^9^8\) While locals coped with fear and looked for effective coping responses, a dramatic political event across the Taiwan Strait gained significant attention in Hong Kong: the so-called Sunflower Movement. This demonstration included a 23-day-long occupation of the legislature that successfully halted the enforcement of a controversial trade agreement between China and Taiwan. Taiwanese resistance to increasing Chinese influence was of direct relevance to the stressful situation experienced by locals in Hong Kong.

Circulation of coping responses

The Sunflower Movement in Taiwan possesses cognitive and emotional significance to locals because it inspires the secondary appraisal in individual coping that concerns options and prospects of coping. Taiwanese storming into the legislature vindicated localist advocacy for direct action, as localist leaders sought moral support to justify their own resistance. Direct action to confront authority is problem-focused coping. The Sunflower Movement also facilitated emotion-focused coping with the realisation that Taiwanese and Hong Kongers have a common stressor: the China factor.\(^9^9\) The fear of China felt in Taiwan echoed the feelings of Hong Kongers, and the thrill of the successful occupation provided hope. A left-wing localist lawmaker reflected: ‘It [the Sunflower Movement] brings me hope. I wonder, why can’t it happen in Hong Kong? No one here has been that brave.’\(^1^0^0\) Through the balancing of fear, Hong Kong activists also experienced disappointment and anger towards the lack of determination of Hong Kongers.

Witnessing the images and texts of the Sunflower Movement, Taiwanese coping responses circulated in Hong Kong and provided new coping narratives and repertoires. Localist leaders also reflected on the meaning of anger and reinterpreted its relationship with action through emotion-focused coping. Anger was recognised as an emotion that could embolden, for it urges people ‘to do some of the things that remove or harm its agent’.\(^1^0^1\) Bowlby argues that two types of anger exist:

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\(^{9^3}\) Interview with localist district councillor, 2017, Hong Kong.

\(^{9^4}\) Interview with localist key opinion leader (KOL) and commentator, 2015, Hong Kong.

\(^{9^5}\) Interview with localist KOL, 2016, Hong Kong.

\(^{9^6}\) Interview with Hong Kong Autonomy Movement localist activist, 2016, Hong Kong.


\(^{1^0^0}\) Interview with left-wing localist legislator, 2017, Hong Kong.

\(^{1^0^1}\) Frijda, ‘The laws of emotion’, p. 351.
a dysfunctional ‘anger of despair’, close to the inflexible state of rage, and a functional ‘anger of hope’, which contains a constructive element in its action tendency. The Sunflower Movement inspired angry localists in Hong Kong to channel their anger into meaningful action, sowing the seeds of an anger of hope. The liberation of Hong Kong’s localist leaders from the anger of despair took place during Taiwan’s Sunflower Movement.

The accentuation of a positive reinterpretation of anger set the scene for the Umbrella Movement, Hong Kong’s own resistance against Chinese influence. In late August 2014, the Beijing government rejected genuine democratic change for Hong Kong. Angry university and secondary-school students immediately launched a comprehensive class boycott. Their anger and despair intensified and led to actions that ushered in the large-scale occupation and civil-disobedience movement. Participation in the Umbrella Movement qualifies as problem-focused coping, which aims to address the cause of negative emotions by taking direct action. A pro-independence localist leader explained that ‘the reason for people to join is simply because … they can feel the problem’. A localist commentator pointed out the quasi-therapeutic qualities of the Umbrella Movement, which temporarily helped with his chronic depression.

Various coping responses enable individuals to reappraise a stressful situation and provide ways to alter it. Taiwan’s social movements and political developments became increasingly relevant to people in Hong Kong through the recognition of a common stressor – influence from China. Moreover, the reappraisal process resulted in Hong Kongers shifting their attention away from Beijing towards Taiwan, as this reorientation contributed to their psychological well-being. Reappraisal is primarily a consequence of emotion-focused coping. The Taiwanese achievements countering Chinese influence demonstrated that the fate of Hong Kong could also be decided by its people.

Following reappraisal, localist leaders communicated emotions (shown in Figure 1) together with their coping responses to the public via social media. Dominated by emotion-focused coping, Hong Kong activists steered their attention away from Beijing, as this reorientation contributed

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Figure 1. An overview of communicated emotions during the Sunflower Movement by localist leaders on Facebook.

Source: Authors’ own survey.

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103 Interview with localist theorist and student leader, 2016, Nuremberg.

104 Pro-independence localist leader, 2016, Hong Kong.

105 Interview with localist commentator and critic, 2019, Hong Kong.
to their psychological well-being. The emotion-focused coping responses were represented and shared by localist leaders through social media and direct communication with followers. Negative emotions targeted China and passive Hong Kongers, while Taiwanese students’ occupation of their parliament elicited positively valanced emotions such as ‘happiness’ and ‘pride’. A localist commentator posted on Facebook that his ‘politics-induced depression disappeared as politics exploded into everyday life’. In his interview he elaborates: ‘In everyday life I feel my survival is meaningless. During the Umbrella Movement, I felt pumped because I found my life meaningful, and I felt hope.’ Through the open communication of coping responses and negative emotions, individual coping is elevated to the collective level. It underlines coping as a communal process, which involves shared emotional understanding of the situation and collective efforts.

Despite Hong Kong localists employing various coping responses, the stressor of mainlandisation remained and continued to generate negative emotions. Negative emotions rose again after the end of the Umbrella Movement in 2014. When police cleared the occupation sites after 79 days, the government refused to make any concessions on questions of democracy and universal suffrage. The failure of the Umbrella Movement amplified the severity of external stress (i.e. mainlandisation) and dealt a serious blow to the psychological well-being of participants. Localist leaders recalled intensified anger, fear, and despair.

The link between individuals’ psychological well-being and the city’s fate foregrounds the emergence of affective communities. Intensified negative emotions could no longer be addressed through previously employed coping responses and thus required different approaches. A localist leader and radio host observed that ‘the entire society is angry, restless and these emotions have no outlet’. Localist activists imbued Hong Kong society with affective qualities, as individually felt stress became situated in a communal context, and Hong Kong as a political community became populated with emotional meanings. Emotion-focused coping therefore became an important coping response for localists, which shaped the boundaries of the emerging affective community.

Individual venting of anger and contempt fuelled anti-China sentiments, and localists were accused of racism and xenophobia. Localists’ anger towards the pro-democracy camp over a perceived weakness vis-à-vis China became expressed in harsh attacks that intensified tensions between the groups and demarcated community boundaries. ‘Despair [was] so widespread in Hong Kong’ that localist leaders deployed emotion-focused coping, which prioritises balancing negative emotions over changing the stressful situation. Classified as a dispiriting emotion, despair initially does not bode well for engendering changes to the status quo. However, the future-orientation of both hope and despair allows room for the reinterpretation of the negative emotion: ‘we can hope even when we are helpless to affect the outcome.’

Localists realised that emotion-focused coping may unleash destructive energy. An anonymous leader of the radical localist organisation Valiant Frontier worried about the fate of the groups’ pre-teenage members.

Emergent and adaptive affective communities

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106 Interview with localist commentator and critic, 2019, Hong Kong.
107 Localist commentator and critic, 2019, Hong Kong.
108 Interview with localist leader, 2017, Hong Kong; interview with localist leader and radio host, 2018, Hong Kong; interview with localist commentator and critic, 2016, Hong Kong.
109 Interview with localist leader and radio host, 2018, Hong Kong.
111 Interview with localist leader, 2017, Hong Kong; interview with pan-democratic politician, 2018, Hong Kong.
112 Interview with localist commentator and critic, 2016, Hong Kong.
He reflected that ‘if you are filled with emotions and let emotions drive your action, then (our action) would just be a riot, not a revolution’.\footnote{115} Consequently, localist leaders deployed problem-focused coping to counter potentially problematic socio-political consequences of emotion-focused coping. Problem-focused coping helps individuals create a hierarchy of priorities. Several localist leaders used meditation as an individual coping response,\footnote{116} which was communicated to supporters as a ‘way of pacifying the mind, cooling them down’, combined with an ‘interpretation of ... China–Hong Kong relations’.\footnote{117} Here, the coping response offered the first radical departure from the status quo thinking on how to achieve democracy in Hong Kong. A pro-independence localist leader disagreed with the pan-democrats’ objective to ‘build a democratic China’\footnote{118} to guarantee democracy in Hong Kong. This cognitive re-sequencing of democratisation was also proposed by a grassroots localist activist.\footnote{119} He argued that it is necessary to ‘de-colonise’ Hong Kong from Chinese rule first and only afterwards explore democratisation. His reorientation towards the issue of independence suppresses competing activities (i.e. the mission of building a democratic China).

Different coping responses also yielded a divergent sense of belonging within Hong Kong. For decades, thousands of Hong Kongers commemorated the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre with an annual candlelight vigil on 4 June. Localists challenged the form of these commemorations organised by pan-democratic groups.\footnote{120} The discussions about 4 June illustrate localists’ interactions and the formation of a community shaped by different emotional understandings of the vigil. For left-wing localists, 4 June is an important emotional connection to the fight for the democratisation of China.\footnote{121} Pro-independence localists ‘disagree with the patriotic sentiment’ of the vigil.\footnote{122} The lack of ‘emotional ties to China’ means a ‘focus on Hong Kong democracy first’.\footnote{123} Solidifying the borders of an affective community that is radical in its contempt towards China and pan-democrats restricted even key localist figures: ‘I couldn’t really talk about my sympathies towards mainland compatriots by remembering [4 June] in a humanitarian manner’.\footnote{125} The debate over the commemoration exemplifies how our emotional well-being may order us to disobey well-established ritual and political habit.

Problem-focused coping allowed localist leaders to reappraise the significance of the Chinese government in Hong Kong’s democratisation process: it became ‘unrealistic to expect Beijing to give universal suffrage or democracy to us’.\footnote{126} The deadlock could only be broken by selective ignoring of the threat from China.\footnote{127} Fixating on the reaction from the Chinese government would only fuel ‘hopelessness and hatred’.\footnote{128} Thus, localists’ abandonment of the ‘democratic China’ future was followed by an alternative imagination of Hong Kong’s future. Ignoring reactions from China, localists embraced Hong Kong independence as the alternative that brought hope,\footnote{129} as the ‘only way out’ for Hong Kong.\footnote{130} In other words, Hong Kong independence became not only a

\footnotesize 115 Interview with anonymous Valiant Frontier leader, 2017, Hong Kong.
116 Interview with localist leader, 2017, Hong Kong.
117 Interview with localist theorist, 2017, Hong Kong.
118 Interview with pro-independence localist leader, 2016, Hong Kong.
119 Interview with grassroots localist activist, 2016, Hong Kong.
121 Interview with left-wing localist grassroots activist, 2016, Hong Kong.
122 Interview with localist leader and LegCo candidate, 2017, Hong Kong.
123 Interview with district-level localist activist, 2016, Hong Kong.
124 Interview with localist leader and LegCo candidate, 2017, London.
125 Localist leader and LegCo candidate, 2017.
126 Localist lawmaker 1, 2018, Hong Kong.
127 Localist KOL, 2016, Hong Kong.
128 Localist pan-democrat, 2016, Hong Kong.
129 Pro-independence localist leader, 2016, Hong Kong.
130 District-level localist activist, 2016, Hong Kong.
preferred future, but also a symbol of hope to localist leaders. The disregard for Beijing was complemented by localists' rising interests in the democratisation of Taiwan and shared emotional attachment to the issue of independence. The newly weighted significance of Taiwan vis-à-vis China during localists' coping processes enabled the articulation and reasoning of the choice of Hong Kong independence. Localist leaders aimed to ‘inspire followers with a vision of state-building’\textsuperscript{131} A localist lawmaker elaborated links between the pursuit of Hong Kong independence and empowerment on a personal level, via steering away from the ‘tragedy and loss’ of not achieving democracy towards a new objective, ‘an optimist picture’ that ‘the Hong Kong public feels we can win’.\textsuperscript{132} The importance of the independence issue therefore lies in its function more as a consensus on how to cope rather than as a detailed political plan. The emotional significance of independence to this community is captured by localist leaders: ‘we have no other choice … independence is the solution for decolonisation’.\textsuperscript{133} Preaching that ‘[Hong Kong independence] is the salvation’,\textsuperscript{134} collective coping within the affective communities defined a new objective and prescribed a desired future that is repressed by geopolitical reality. Hong Kong independence is thus empowered with emotional legitimacy within the localist affective community, which draws the boundary of the affective community and consolidates the affective bond among its members.

Localist leaders removed pan-democrats from their affective community. This is the result of various coping responses reflected in a survey of localist leaders on their differences with the pan-democrats, shown in Figure 2. The consequences of two coping responses are ranked highest: emotional appeals as a result of emotion-focused coping, and the issue of independence as a result of problem-focused coping.

Pan-democrats detest the idea of independence because it ‘poke[s] the tiger in the eye’.\textsuperscript{135} Instead, their leaders cope with the stressful situation in Hong Kong by fixating on ‘democratisation’ as a priority embedded in a fight for a democratic China.\textsuperscript{136} Localists’ rejection of China, in conjunction with emotional appeals such as anger and hope, enabled the rise of independence as the prime

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{Figure2.png}
\caption{Localists’ perceptions of their difference from pan-democrats.}
\label{fig:localists-perceptions}
\end{figure}

Source: Authors’ own survey.

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{131} Interview with anonymous Valiant Frontier leader, 2017, Hong Kong.
\textsuperscript{132} Interview with localist lawmaker 2, 2015, Hong Kong.
\textsuperscript{133} Localist lawmaker 2, 2015.
\textsuperscript{134} Interview with Civic Passion strategist, 2016, Hong Kong.
\textsuperscript{135} Interview with pan-democratic politician, 2018, Hong Kong.
\textsuperscript{136} This means different coping processes could create multiple, co-existing, or even competing affective communities.
\end{flushright}
difference from the pan-democrats. This means that localists’ problem-focused coping responses led them to assign gravitas to the issue of independence.

With localism as a broad concept resonating with various political groups in Hong Kong, a localist lawmaker warned that ‘pan-democrats are stealing the term (localism)’ and suggested moving on ‘to an issue that they dare not to steal. We are using nation-building, which is too radical for them.’ Hence, independence becomes the litmus test for members within the affective community, because it symbolises the emotional bond that unites them. The pursuit of independence interweaves individual coping with a collective effort to search for Hong Kong’s future. This continuous collective and individual coping with prevailing negative emotions guarantees sufficient emotional energy to sustain the affective community.

The durability of coping and affective community
Our interview data reveals that, in some cases, everyday stresses experienced by localist leaders accumulated to traumatising levels. During the scaling-up from individual coping to the collective, Hong Kong independence emerged as an embodiment of hope, a key coping resource. The durability of the independence issue does not lie in its practicality. Instead, the strength of the affective community and the rising political significance of independence resides in the stressor, i.e. pressure from the Chinese government: ‘the more the Chinese government pushes us, the more determined the future generation will become.’

In June 2019, Hong Kong was rocked by mass demonstrations against proposed amendments to the extradition law. Affective patterns and the coping process recurred. Triggering the protests was the fear that the legal amendments would allow extraditions of Hong Kong residents to the PRC. Anger resurfaced as the Hong Kong government ignored public demands and deployed heavy-handed police tactics against peaceful protestors. The escalating police brutality was met with an increasing radicalisation of protests, escalating the stressor of mainlandisation into trauma. More than 1 in 10 adults (11.2%) in Hong Kong suffer from post-traumatic stress syndrome, which is closely linked to the political climate.

Problem-focused coping such as direct action is visible and mainstreamed in the form of broad support from society. Survey data shows that at the height of the movement, 98.4% of respondents agreed with the statement ‘I think we are in the same boat’ when asked about the appropriateness of ‘radical and confrontational actions to express their demands’. In addition, the solidarity between Taiwan and Hong Kong grew stronger as a result of emotion-focused coping, to the extent that the anti-extradition movement in Hong Kong impacted the early campaign phase of the 2020 presidential election in Taiwan.

137 Interview with localist lawmaker 2, 2015, Hong Kong.
138 Lazarus, ‘Hope’.
139 Interview with localist lawmaker 3, 2016, Hong Kong.
141 In 2014, after the Umbrella Movement, 6.5% of adults suffered from PTSD, while before the movement it was only 1.9%. See Michael Y. Ni, Xiaoxin I. Yao, Kathy S. M. Leung et al. ‘Depression and post-traumatic stress during major social unrest in Hong Kong: A 10-year prospective cohort study’, The Lancet, 395:10220 (2020), pp. 273–84.
143 James Pomfret and Clare Jim, ‘Exclusive: Hong Kongers support protester demands; minority wants independence from China – Poll’, Reuters, (31 December 2019), available at: [https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-hongkong-protests-poll-exclusive-idUKKBN1YZ0VJ].
Even though the anti-extradition movement is not about Hong Kong independence, there was a small uptick in support for independence: 19.5% of respondents supported Hong Kong independence even after the passage of the national security law.\textsuperscript{147} Alongside support reflected in opinion polls, emotional attachments to Hong Kong independence became more visible during the protests in the form of slogans, banners, and artwork.\textsuperscript{148} These signified the increasing emotional attachment to an alternative vision for Hong Kong’s future. Developments since the introduction of the national security law in 2020 indicate that the emergent affective community has adapted to the political challenges in Hong Kong. The exodus of Hong Kongers does not prevent them from organising global rallies, which extend the territorial borders of the affective community and verify its adaptive nature.\textsuperscript{149}

\section*{Conclusion}

The theorisation of coping in this paper is a renewed effort to appreciate the coping process in IR. Continuing the articulation that emotions matter in the discipline, our intervention suggests that the process of \textit{dealing with} emotions is also a constitutive feature of global politics, shaping the conditions of political possibilities.

While the main literature this paper speaks to is emotions in IR, our theoretical framework of coping enhances the engagement with coping in political psychology and ontological security literatures. The foregrounding of emotion-focused coping in individual decision-making incorporates leaders’ emotional well-being into the calculation. In addition, the theory of coping provides a new lens with a sharper focus on how leaders process emotional states. This will allow new ways of examining the existing evidence of \textit{dealing with} stressors in autobiographies, official speeches, and archival materials. This paper’s encounter with the ontological security literature suggests the significance of individuals’ emotional well-being. The non-state nature of our illustrative case testifies to the relevance of ontological security to sub-national discontent and disagreement, highlighting the distributive politics of anxiety management.

Our contribution to the established theorisation of emotions in IR is to fine-tune the levelling-up process by offering two amendments. Conceptually, the coping framework adds the circulation of coping responses to the scaling-up pathways for collective affective experience. Self-representation and representation in the communication of coping responses allows individuals to stock up coping resources, which is vital because structure-induced stress exceeds the resources of a single person. Relatedly, the methodological contribution of this paper is to shed light on self-representation that connects individuals’ emotional well-being to collective agency.

The illustrative case of Hong Kong is a sharper instance of more general phenomena, such as social movements, revolutions, civil disobedience, global action in response to the climate crisis, and nationalist protests. When protest is experienced as quasi-therapy, the official narratives of intimidation and repression feed the loop of coping and collective action. In the case of Hong Kong, the sovereign’s strategy to impose legislation to criminalise separatist ideas created an exodus of Hong Kongers. Ironically, it was Beijing that made an otherwise small-scale, local, and sub-national level of suffering globally visible. Findings from this paper have policy implications. They rectify the official diagnosis that Hong Kongers’ problems are merely socio-economic. This research shows these are questions of emotional well-being, and failure to recognise this drives Hong Kongers to seek more creative political options.

\textsuperscript{147}Robert Ting-Yiu Chung, Karie Ka-lai Pang, Winnie Wing-yi Lee, and Edward Chit-fai Tai, ‘Survey on Hong Kong people’s views regarding the Anti-Extradition Bill movement (Round 4)’, available at: [https://www.pori.hk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/reuters_anti_elab_round4_ENG_v1_pori.pdf].


The limitations of this paper arise from the richness of the empirical data. An example is the discussion of 4 June among localists, which prompts questions about whether coping leads to division in society per se or if it is a case-specific development. Future research could address this outstanding question through a deeper dive into the psychology of coping with reference to ontological security literature. This could potentially clarify the linkage between anxiety and creativity, as it might be that the positive potential of anxiety is realised during the coping process. International politics induce stressful situations, and how we cope with stress in turn may sow the seeds for change and creativity.

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