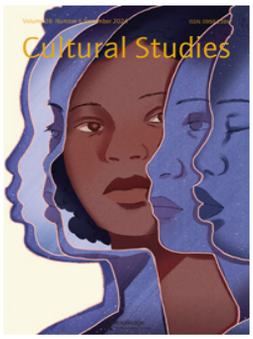

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Between consciousness and conscience: on 'restorative commoning' among moderate youth

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ABSTRACT

This paper turns to the question of youth social mobilization within the context of the culture war that has produced polarized views of youth's life worlds and capacities. In the discussion of youth engagement to pursue social change, attention is often drawn to the more 'radical' youth who engage in the spectacular and militant forms of protest. Little is understood about the less sensational forms of participation among more moderate youth, or their strategic repertoires of action in conception and in practice. Building on a contextual cultural political analysis of youth engagement for social change in Hong Kong over the past fifteen years or so, and incorporating a critical analysis of ethnographic semi-structured interviews of youth participants in a civic leadership challenge programme in 2023, this study attempts to delineate the underlying discursive conditions of possibility that generate a particular form of youth-based 'care commons.' It is argued that this care commons is being formed by the moderate youth's engagements in local and transnational causes and leadership challenges and that such engagements take place along a trajectory that moves from a general liberal consciousness to a discourse of conscience 'awakening.' Thus, the study traces and connects the rise of a *change-maker consciousness/desire* among youth with the rise among them of a *moral conscience* for a sense of redemption. Further, it is proposed that this connection enables a practice of care by way of 'restorative commoning,' which contains collective practices of care holding the shared meanings of recovery, healing, and social stabilization through inclusiveness. Examining this trajectory of mobilization *from consciousness to conscience*, it is argued, will help us gain a better understanding of the predicament of the moderate political identity of youth.

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KEYWORDS Moderate youth; civic leadership; care commons; restorative commoning; moral conscience; Hong Kong

Introduction

In March 2019, on a chilly, rainy day in Tondabayashi, Osaka, I stepped off the train, brimming with curiosity about the Workcamp awaiting me.

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While Japan boasts numerous environmental NGOs, the local one hosting this Workcamp called *Tondabayashi no Shizen wo Mamoru Kai* (Nature Conservation Group of Osaka), stood out. Here, local farmers in their 50s to 70s worked as volunteers alongside young volunteers recruited from around Japan and internationally, to preserve the forests of Tondabayashi. Working intergenerationally, they performed tree-cutting and scrub-trimming in the dense forest areas, aimed at restoring ecological balance and ensuring proper water regulation.

In his soft, seasoned voice, the group's 74-year-old leader, Mr. Kimura, regaled us with tales of the community's collective efforts in rural areas, where individuals self-organized to provide commendable local services despite facing constraints. Mr. Kimura lamented the abandonment of large forest areas in Tondabayashi as the local population aged. Yet, he also shared heartwarming stories of how locals honoured their ancestors practices of utilizing wood for charcoal, using fallen leaves as fertilizers, and crafting wooden tools. Their commitment to clearing the forest stemmed from a mix of motives, from a simple love for promoting biodiversity to the camaraderie and social bonds forged through shared endeavours. Mr. Kimura's narrative painted a vivid picture of a 'social commons,' characterized by the collective spirit of volunteerism, sharing, and sacrifice – a phenomenon that may be termed 'commoning.'

During the bond fire supper on the last evening – a much anticipated end-of-Workcamp event for all the youthful volunteers – I took note of their reflection of the volunteer experience. Many spoke of their voluntary will and how important 'decentralization' was whereby the use of social cues for collaborating and compromising was key to their sense of agency to do volunteer work. As such, these volunteers shared that they valued autonomy over coordinated or even 'militant' forms of social action. However, while distancing themselves from the 'aggression' of sensational forms of activism, they did speak about the 'boredom' and 'lack of energy' of many familiar kinds of self-organizing, such as forming a human chain in a protest rally, making origami as commemorative objects for victims, or singing protest songs.

In the Workcamp, I learned that caring and commoning both involve fostering mutually dependent social relations that emphasize the importance of sharing resources and building communities. Through conjoining caring and commoning practice, individuals are liberated from the dominant structural logics of neoliberalism and extractivism. This liberation is achieved by creating a regulated social enclave where individuals voluntarily come together to satisfy their situated needs. In other words, caring and commoning offer an alternative to alienation and isolation and allow for the creation of inclusive and empowering spaces where individuals can actively participate in shaping their collective future. Thus, at the Workcamp, I did not only witness a living commons being practised (in the spirit of 'satoyama'), I was also intrigued by

the questions that my entire Workcamp experience had raised: What makes 'a good agent' for a culture of commons among young people? In practicing commoning, what social values, ideologies, and even moral norms shaped the youth's subjectivity? What lies between the 'militant' and the 'unenergetic' forms of social engagement for those youth who wish to be changemakers at a global juncture marked by socioeconomic precarity and political crises?

The aim of this study is to examine the underlying individual and collective conditions of possibility that shape, and are shaped by, self-identified 'moderate' youth who have become keenly aware of the mounting socio-ecological problems of varying scales and are taking action to bring about alternative ways of social organization for change. In the theoretical work of the commons, there is a strong emphasis on the epistemic foundation of political economics to explain the modes of production and resource management, including of course the study of the enclosures movement and the resultant privatization control of public resources (Amin & Howell, 2016; Brancaccio and Vercellone 2019, Dellenbaugh-Losse 2020, Gibson-Graham *et al.* 2013). Another emphasis has also been placed on the question of subjectivity of the interlocutors in social movements in the process of transformation through self-governance. From the problem of the commons as the study of political economic structures to a turn to the social form that highlights the procedural dynamics of 'commoning,' this turn of emphasis feeds a rich set of ideas. It is to this second line of thinking that this paper will be dedicated.

This paper comprises three parts. First, a brief overview of the cultural and political context of youth engagement in social change in Hong Kong over the past 15 years is provided. Key moments such as the preservation movement and the democratic movement advocating for autonomy, were examined. Strikingly, the trajectory from the early 2000s through the Umbrella Movement in 2014 to the controversial Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill movement of 2019[1] (referred to as the anti-ELAB movement) is marked by two significant characteristics: these movements were large-scale, with millions of participants – a scale unprecedented in previous movements, and they were predominantly peaceful, employing tactics such as civic public assembly and media campaigns (until the eruption of riots in autumn 2019). By and large, the recent history of youth movements in Hong Kong up until the autumn of 2019 is a portrait of moderate popular politics underlined by inclusiveness, social learning, and altruism.

In the second part of this paper, I delved into an empirical study involving self-identified moderate youth who participated in a civic leadership challenge in 2023. The aim was to gather their firsthand perspectives on social care, solidarity, and collective sharing, and to explore how these concepts connect to the notions of commons and commoning. In-depth interviews

with forty individuals – a mix of local and international participants from the programme – were conducted, prompting them to reflect on the main themes and contradictions they encountered while grappling with socio-ecological crises and experimenting with alternative forms of social organization in their respective environments. Moving on to the third section, I focus on the central argument of this paper, which revolves around the evolving politics of moderate youth identity formation. I observe a shift from a broad liberal consciousness, emphasizing traditional values of equality and liberty, towards a re-alignment of political sentiment centred on 'moral awakening.' By tracing the real and discursive changes in youth identity and social mobilization, I aim to highlight the emergence of a restorative youth commons. Through their engagement in restorative commoning practices, these moderate youth showcase a continual quest to rejuvenate themselves and their communities. In this context, 'restoration' signifies collective recuperation, even healing, following periods of social upheaval.

'I feel like society, community'

It is no exaggeration to say that post-millennial youth today have seen monumental global change resulting from deteriorating socioeconomic conditions and escalating political tension.[2] Renewed discussions of youth diverse citizenship and their myriad forms of social mobilization in international contexts abound (Gordon 2007, Anderson 2013, Terriquez 2015, Earl *et al.* 2017, Goldman *et al.* 2017, El-Sharnouby 2018, Ben Moussa 2019, Finn and Momani 2019, Madonia and Contreras 2019, Rubio 2019, Lauby 2021, Yuen and Tang 2021, Bangura 2022, Griffiths 2022, Welton and Harris 2022, Christou *et al.* 2023, Kubow *et al.* 2023). In Hong Kong, the three-way entanglement of postcolonial politics, prolonged capitalist urban over-development, and national reunification has produced what can be called an exceptional space of sociocultural and political contestation. Over the past 15 years or so, local youth have responded to these prodigious changes with bountiful energy in ad hoc, small, and massive scales (see, e.g. DeGolyer 2010, Chan and Fu 2017, Lowe and Tsang 2018, Wang 2019, Dapiran 2020, Lee and Lo 2020, Pan 2021, Van de Velde 2022, Chua Reyes 2023).

> Up until the autumn of 2019 before the radical turn of the anti-ELAB movement, the effort to build social solidarity has largely been moderate in nature. In ethnographic terms, the participants in the various social movements were seen to adopt what Schwedler (2011) has called 'protodemocratic' means of advocacy (350), in which the youth's dissatisfaction with the dominant political structures has nonetheless kept them working alongside the power bases, such as the elites of the democratic political parties. Schwedler argues that being protodemocratic means a process of forming a continuum of political dispositions from moderate to more radical. For instance, Chan (2017) observes Hong Kong youth's impressive 'prostrating walk' imitating Tibetan pilgrims during

Occupy Central in Hong Kong in 2014, with its powerful but quiet symbolization of the suffering masses. In Chu's (2018) study of the local school settings where students, teachers, and principals were immersed in using different media for information sharing, opinion expression, and mobilization during the Umbrella Movement, she reconstructed what she called the 'tactful negotiations' between school authorities and student leaders during the movement, negotiations that stressed the seeking of 'harmony' in local education settings at the times of heated debate for democratic change in society. Moreover, in Lam-Knott's (2018) study of the 'post-80s' youth in Hong Kong – who were central to the protest against the construction of a high-speed railway – she found the youth's criticism of the entrenched hierarchical dynamics in Hong Kong political culture had resulted in varying demands ranging from negotiation to reform political parties, representational re-balancing, the provision of more horizontal structures, to advocating for a way of doing politics where individual voices would trump collective opinions. Although they were referred to as 'youth activists,' this group is not uniform because members of this group came from a variety of class backgrounds and phases of life. While some worked full- or part-time employment as teachers, journalists, farmers, office clerks, or in the creative industries or non-governmental organisations, others were university students. They were from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds – from working-class to middle-class – and had varying political goals; some were proponents of more radical anarchist ideas, while others supported more gradual reforms (Lam-Knott 2019, p. 379, see also Chang 2021, Lam-Knott 2018, Lui 2005, To 2014).

Regardless of their diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and life situations, these youths share the experience of having witnessed momentous changes in the city. Among them, moderation – in the broad sense entailing a process and an assortment of positions rather than a fixed category – appears to be tied to Hong Kong youth's adherence to notions of tolerance, pluralism, and cooperation. Their sense of social agency kept them open to the possibility that other perspectives were valid, even if not equally so. An indication of the presence of political moderation can be seen at the beginning of the anti-ELAB movement in June 2019, when protesters were in fact already fractured, with a peaceful but determined assembly filling major roadways in the daytime. They were clearly distinguished from the night protesters who were mostly young people, blackclad and mask-wearing, quick in action and resolute in spirit. A difference was clearly marked between the 'wo lei fei' (和理非) group (advocating the peaceful, rational, and non-violent principle) and the 'yongwu' (勇武) faction (pushing for confrontation, including physical combat). By autumn, what were a fracturing few in the 'yongwu' group engaging in mainly night actions swelled to occupy the centre stage of an unprecedented public protest movement never seen in public life in Hong Kong before.

Commonly, the radical youth is often featured at the centre of youth movements; their lightening-rod iconicity often makes for vast media and public consumption, and sometimes exaggeration. With the focus being

cast on the youth's radicalism through their participation in flamboyant protest tactics, there is comparatively little understanding of the more moderate youth's strategic repertoires of action or their less sensational forms of participation (see Bermeo 1997, Wickham 2004, Brownlee 2010, Tezcur 2010).

> As local moderate youth in Hong Kong navigated the intricate sociocultural and political environment, their actions demonstrated a dedication to supporting one another and engaging in collective practices to address their situated needs. Their involvement illustrated the interconnected importance of caring for each other and participating in commoning practices to cultivate interdependent social connections and establish a structured social space that prioritized shared collective wellbeing. Through their moderate approach, they upheld values of tolerance, pluralism, and cooperation to establish caring publics, with the ultimate goal of freeing individuals from restrictive structural norms.

Engaging the moderate youth: a case of civic leadership challenge

In this project, we partnered with VolTra, a Hong Kong-based youth organization established in 2009. After a decade of growth, VolTra – a name compressing volunteerism and travelling – has built a reputation locally for stimulating youth to engage themselves as 'change-makers' by mobilizing its connection to a well-established worldwide network of international voluntary service organizations to promote voluntary services to 'enhance global citizenship and friendship as well as to strengthen solidarity of the local communities' (VolTra's Vision Statement). Before the global COVID outbreak disrupted its operations, VolTra organised more than 4,500 international workcamps and volunteer initiatives in about 55 nations annually. VolTra's record shows that cumulatively it has collaborated with 189 overseas partner organizations in 102 countries. More than 4,300 Hong Kong 'voltrateers' had participated in workcamps, engaging with diverse communities in Japan, Mongolia, India, Nepal, Cambodia, Taiwan, Thailand, as well as regions in Europe, Latin America, and Africa.

VolTra's dedication to local and international relief efforts reflects the intersection of caring and commoning. Through their initiatives, they prioritize community welfare, mutual support, and collaboration, creating spaces where individuals come together to address shared needs. The author's workcamp experience in Tondabayashi-city in Japan in 2019 was also facilitated by VolTra, an experience in which the author witnessed the duality of the ethos of caring and commoning. Also, the author has conducted a previous ethnographic study of the organization (Erni and Leung 2019), with a focus to explore whether there had been a revival of 'youthful aspirations' in the age of precarity, by examining youth groups transnational civic participation in

the form of 'volunteer tourism.' In 2021, VolTra rebranded itself as 'a pioneer in Education Technology' by launching the VolTra Academy,[3] which provided online courses with a gamified learning experience on their tailor-made app called GOODMATES.[4] During and after the pandemic, VolTra kept exploring flexible and hybrid educational approaches that integrated learning, volunteering, digital technology, and action. They aimed to inspire young individuals to become 'digital nomads' to drive social change within their communities. By summer 2023, more than 26,600 people became members of the VolTra Academy, which had over 100,000 followers on social media.

In early 2023, we collaborated with VolTra to launch the Youth Caring Leadership Training and Action Programme. The programme was used as a case study that would look deeper into youth social engagements, including volunteerism, in order to extend our understanding of the notion of care leadership. Based in The Education University of Hong Kong (EduHK), the author recruited 99 students on campus while leveraging VolTra's international network to recruit 222 overseas participants (mainly from Southeast Asia). A total of 321 participants, aged between 17 and 33, engaged in a Leadership Preparation Workshop, an online Training Session, and a Caring Leader Salon (featuring award-winning guest speakers to share their experiences in social projects as change-makers).

The programme included two stages: individual challenges in Stage One[5] and cooperation-oriented challenges in Stage Two focused on designing a 'Caring Project' related to the SDGs. Participants who completed both stages had the opportunity to win free international workcamps or boot camps. After the programme, 40 winners[6] were interviewed about their motivations, volunteer experiences, and reflections (see Table 1 for their profile). The data obtained from these interviews formed the basis of the qualitative analysis in the paper.

Our 40 informants, aged from 17 to 33 years old, 31 females and 9 males, won our caring leadership challenge through demonstrating their resolves and creativity in thinking through social care issues. Apparently, the young women are more competitive and skilful than men in gamified challenges concerning social care. All but one of them are currently enrolled in universities. Among the 20 EduHK students, of which 16 are Hong Kong SAR citizens and 4 are from Mainland China, the majority of them study the language and education fields, with the rest taking up psychology, environmental studies, public policy, biology, and education technology. We reckon that more than half of these youth must have witnessed the explosion of protests in Hong Kong during their first year at the university. Some of them would have had among their peers participated in the protest movement, therefore witnessing the unfolding of the split between the moderate and more radical youth and therefore shaping their views and sentiments about what was possible and achievable in their community.

Table 1. Profile of Interviewed Participants.

HONG KONG SAR / CHINA						
Code	Alias	Gender	Age	Citizenship	Major	Study Year
E1	Yanis	F	21	HKSAR	English Education & Language Studies	Year 3
E2	Lily	F	23	HKSAR	Chinese Language Education	Year 4
E3	Kelly	F	18	China	Chinese Language Education	Year 1
E4	Daisy	F	17	China	Chinese Language Education	Year 1
E5	Henry	M	21	HKSAR	Integrated environmental management	Year 3
E6	Marilyn	F	22	HKSAR	English Education & Language Studies	Year 3
E7	Nancy	F	18	China	Chinese Language Education	Year 1
E8	Shelley	F	18	HKSAR	Chinese Language Education	Year 1
E9	Anthony	M	21	HKSAR	English Education & Language Studies	Year 2
E10	Larissa	F	21	HKSAR	Psychology	Year 3
E11	Charles	M	22	HKSAR	AI & Education Technology	Year 3
E12	Hillary	F	24	HKSAR	Psychology	Year 4
E13	Mindy	F	23	HKSAR	English Education & Language Studies	Year 4
E14	Rosa	F	25	HKSAR	English Education & Language Studies	Year 5
E15	Daphne	F	22	HKSAR	Global & Environmental Studies	Year 3
E16	Queenie	F	20	HKSAR	Master of Public Policy & Management	Masters; Year 1
E17	Natalie	F	25	HKSAR	English Education & Language Studies	Year 5
E18	Tammy	F	22	HKSAR	Biology	Year 3
E19	Jenny	F	23	HKSAR	English Education & Language Studies	Year 4
E20	Wanda	F	21	HKSAR	Global & Environmental Studies	Year 2
INTERNATIONAL (MAINLY SOUTH & SOUTHEAST ASIA)						
Code	Alias	Gender	Age	Citizenship	Major	Study Year
N1	Nel	F	18	Laos	Architecture	Year 1
N2	Peggy	F	22	Laos	English language	Year 4
N3	Amy	F	22	Indonesia	English Literature	Year 4
N4	Hannah	F	21	Indonesia	Management	Year 3
N5	Dorothy	F	24	Sri Lanka	Design	Year 3
N6	Hattie	F	24	Sri Lanka	Teaching English as a Second Language	Year 3
N7	Judy	F	22	Myanmar	International Relations	Year 3
N8	Fred	M	26	Cambodia	Medical Laboratory Science	Year 5
N9	Laura	F	33	Philippines	Master of Clinical Audiology	Masters; Year 2
N10	Carol	F	26	Peru	Nursing & English Education	Year 5
N11	Janice	F	20	Pakistan	Medicine & Surgery	Year 4
N12	Selina	F	24	Pakistan	Engineering	Just Graduated
N13	Victor	M	21	India	Commerce	Year 2
N14	Alex	M	21	Kenya	Landscape Architecture	Year 4
N15	James	M	23	Vietnam	Economics & International Development	Year 4
N16	Clara	F	29	Colombia	Logistics Management	Year 5
N17	Jackson	M	22	Cambodia	Economic Development	Year 4
N18	Audrey	F	23	Cambodia	Law	Year 3
N19	Jasmine	F	25	Indonesia	Master of Business Administration	Masters; Year 1
N20	Danny	M	20	Taiwan	International Business	Year 4

We also granted awards in an equal number to international youth who were invited to join the GOODMATES challenge. This was designed in order to give our study a more expansive view of youth's engagement in social movements; it would also provide an element of comparison in the divide, roughly, between the more developed and developing countries. The contrasting background would come to explain the two groups different concerns relating to the idea of commons, such as de-growth, consumption, and development.[7] In the interviews, a majority of them identified as holding more moderate political views, and related that their educational attainment and prior experiences in volunteering might be key factors that shaped their more measured and 'rational' approaches to pursue social change.

Natalia (25, HKSAR) shared: 'I would consider myself more of a moderate, because, because, I'm not sure if you can tell, I feel like society, community. Small things, small things matter to me, those really matter … So to me I would say, I'm more of a moderate, if I really have to like give myself a tag. Just be nice, be kind to people. Take notice of small things, try to understand people, other people's experience, and that itself already. To me it's already like trying to make connections, and I do believe those small connections could weave into a bigger net into a bigger community. Rosa (25, HKSAR) recalled: 'The year I joined the student society was a time of the social movement. Some people around me were accused and taken away. I was not very radical in terms of my political stance. I thought the issue was not as black and white as it seemed, and there were many intricacies involved. Some issues were not as simple as we thought. But at the same time, I knew that we couldn't change the whole society through policies. Many people around me were emotionally troubled, anxious, uncertain, and unsure of what to do. People asked many questions without answers. This made me want to be more caring to people.'[8] To Anthony (21, HKSAR), the label 'moderate youth' was only a relative category: 'Compared to the previous generation, we may be a little more radical because the previous generation was a post-war period when all industries were thriving, and everyone was relatively happy. Now because some people point out some problems and take action, some think it's extreme. But compared to revolutions and wars, we are relatively mild. I think young people should play a role in speaking out and voicing their opinions. If they don't speak out, they will slowly acquiesce to situations and not see problems as problems.'[9]

Engaging in volunteer work, it turns out, is a clear hallmark of these moderate youth's identity and experience. They talked a great deal about it: Jackson (22, Cambodia) was a volunteer teacher for 5 years; Tammy (22, HKSAR) and Yannis (21, HKSAR) offered free tutorial lessons to new immigrants from Mainland China; Hillary (24, HKSAR) worked for a food rescue NGO; James (23, Vietnam) became committed to human rights by

volunteering in a disability group; Mindy (23, HKSAR) and Anthony (21, HKSAR) worked to support ethnic minority in employment and education; and Larissa (21, HKSAR) taught children in grassroots communities how to recycle and care about the environment (see also Bishop and Willis 2014, Cheung *et al.* 2015).

Liberal consciousness, moderate identity, and commoning

In the literature on the commons, it is postulated that communities live in an endless state of scarcity (e.g. Turner 2017, Kostakis 2018, Morrow and Parker 2020). The progression of society has not diminished the pursuit of bodily security and integrity in the forms of food, shelter, social relations, esteem, eventually 'self-actualization' (Brancaccio and Vercellone 2019, Mustofa 2022). Our informants can easily point to those needs, from which their sense of social responsibility emerged. However, social resources are finite, which is to say structurally, a mismatch exists between what is needed and what could be used (Euler 2018). In expressing how they cared about society and community, our informants nonetheless did not pay sufficient regards to *how* caring would become normalized, such as how it forms a 'social regulation.' Elinor Ostrom (1990, 2003) would qualify their positive attitude by introducing the complications of human-good interaction means, contextualized human agency, and the larger sociocultural ideology about resource distribution and sharing (see also Bennholdt-Thomsen 2012). When viewed from the perspective of the commons, the positive 'social resources' that our informants all spoke about in relation to their moderate outlook – resources such as kindness, social connection, reassurance, inclusiveness, speaking out, the mattering of 'small things,' volunteering – would constitute a social construction of 'commoning' were they to understand the linkage among three important elements, namely resources, humans, and rules on the societal level, thus turning their care into a dynamic process (Stavrides 2022).

Needless to say, care and caring are central to the formation of the commons. Yet care and caring are also prone to suspicion. Numerous cultural critics have rightly pointed out how care has been institutionalized, marketized, steeped in gender and racial imbalance, and even weaponized by the righteous moralist agenda (see, e.g. Tronto 1987, Held 2005, Reich 2013, Patel and Moore 2017, Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, Chow 2018, Saito 2022, Turner and Tam 2022). In fact, in *The Care Manifesto: The Politics of Interdependence*, the UK-based Care Collective (2020) urged us to acknowledge a 'pandemic of carelessness' in a world created by neoliberalism, which had replaced Keynesian economics as the logic of the global capitalist system in the wake of the stagflation since the 1970s.[10] To combat the pervasiveness of carelessness in global society, the *Manifesto* summons us to turn care into

the front and centre of our concerns through human interdependence. It is in this way that such a useful polemic dovetails with the concerns of the commons. By the *Manifesto*'s recognition of 'the myriad ways that our survival and our thriving are everywhere and always contingent on others' (30), it is also articulating the discursive groundwork for the commons. We can therefore say that caring and commoning share the same value and logic about fostering mutually dependent social relations (among humans and non-humans) that have the potential to share resources and build communities to liberate conditioned subjects from the superimposing structural logics of neoliberalism and extractivism to create a regulated social enclave to satisfy situated needs among voluntarily assembled selves.

But for our informants, how do they make sense of the relation between caring and commoning? They do so largely through the condemnation of human selfishness. When commenting on the root causes for the erosion of common access to public resources (such as the lack of shared food or the persistent shortage of public housing in Hong Kong), Charles (22, HKSAR) bluntly put it: 'Human greed. Some people will take the resources even though they are not qualified to take, as long as the resources are free, which results in a shortage of resources.'[11] Natalie (25, HKSAR) chipped in: 'In my parents' generation, they come from a society where they don't have enough resources. But they would literally help their neighbours. Now we have more, but we work less for society, and more for ourselves.' Lily (23, HKSAR) provided an elaboration:

> On one hand, the uneven distribution of social resources is a contributing factor. Most resources are allocated to the commercial sector, such as the allocation of land for commercial use, making it difficult to allocate a significant amount of public space. On the other hand, there is an issue of awareness. Hong Kong people may not be accustomed to sharing resources with others and have a more individualistic mindset, placing a greater emphasis on 'private ownership right.' Though this concept typically pertains to housing, I believe it can be extended to other aspects as well. People prefer to help, but not to share.[12]

Helping without sharing seems to vitiate the tie between caring and commoning. Many of our informants attributed the root cause of the problem to individualism and the clutching of self-interest. As Anthony (21, HKSAR) decried: 'selfishness! There're some privileged people that have already had lots of resources yet they refuse to share with others, which is the major impediment to achieving the common good.'[13]

Our informants contrast between self-interest and altruistic interest suggests a linkage between consciousness-raising and the communal forging of the commons, since both imply a degree of political awareness or interpretive understanding of the reasons for oppression, inequality, and injustice. Snow and Lessor (2022) remind us that since at least Marx and

Engels, 'consciousness' has been central to various analyses of social movements. As Snow and Lessor attribute consciousness-raising as involving 'the adoption of a diagnostic frame and corollary attribution scheme in which a problem, or set of problems, and its locus of blame or casualty are simultaneously sharpened and generalized' (n.p.), we can say that to a certain degree, our informants apply a similar framing mechanism to their understanding of commoning.[14] The informants diagnosis of 'helping without sharing' and the cause of selfishness are generalized charges of blame. Further, one of the salient aspects of consciousness-raising that Snow and Lessor emphasize is 'frame amplification,' which 'entails the embellishment, crystallization, and invigoration of existing values, beliefs, and understandings so that they are more salient and dominant' (n.p.). An example of such amplification can be found when Laura (33, The Philippines) spoke proudly of the sense of common decency in her country, especially among the downtrodden:

> In our country for Filipinos, we have built caring relationships to help people. And we enjoy greater freedom and rights, especially in marginalized communities that lack basic resources. An example of this is the 'Bayanihan' spirit. This is a Filipino tradition, helping one another. It is deeply ingrained in the Philippine culture, because 'Bayanihan' is a Filipino term that describes communal work or mutual assistance for the common in their time of need. Individuals or groups joined together to help neighbours or members of their communities. This is often on full display in times of natural disasters, such as typhoons and earthquakes, or in times of crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic. This can include the provision of food, water, shelter, and other basic necessities and some community would get organizing and advocacy or lend a helping hand.

As a cultural term, 'Bayanihan' amplifies and extends the circle of caring relationships because the motivation to help encompasses concerns that are relevant to what Snow and Lessor would call potential 'consciousness adherents' in addition to the initial constituency. Both movement leaders and followers can carry out this kind of amplification and expansion. Whether in Hong Kong's social movements or the Philippines's folk communal culture, we can detect genuine beliefs of commoning that are very much supported by the youth's contextualized consciousness framing.

What needs to be emphasized is that while the youth's liberal values and consciousness-raising turn them into activists, there is little self-identification among them as engaging in radical activism. In fact, we would interpret their position as rather constraint. We detected time and again in the interviews that our informants marked and affirmed their sense of agency within variations of some principled underlying beliefs of democracy, social care, and civic citizenship. By doing so, their responses often conveyed a sense of self-control. Even as they expressed consciousness amplification, they

tended to embellish within the variable boundaries of common morality and decency. Of course, our engagement programme in a 'care leadership civic challenge' would have to a certain degree framed them within a certain discourse around moderate social change marked by common morality and decency. Be that as it may, however, it is a well-known fact that social movements often exhibit binding prosocial moral motivations, intuitions, and increasingly, a sense of 'moral awakening' (see Gil 2018, Pruce 2018, Grear and Bollier 2020, Nisbett and Spaiser 2023).

The commoner as an emergent morally conscientious subject

By now, a copious amount of critical analyses exists to understand and diagnose the rise of recent youth protest movements in Hong Kong (see, e.g. Chan 2017, Wong and Chu 2017, Augustin-Jean and Cheung 2018, Chu 2018, Lai 2018, Lam-Knott 2018, 2020a, 2020b, Ip 2019, 2020, Jackson and O'Leary 2019, Chu and Yeo 2020, Ku 2020, Pang 2020, Yeung 2020, Zuraidah and Lam 2020, Chan 2021, Tang and Cheng 2021, Tang and Chung 2022, Wong 2022, Tsang 2023). A salient aspect of these analyses concerns the youth's moral outrage against social injustices, leading to a growing discourse of 'moral awakening' (see Jasper 1997, Hongo 2011, Perren 2012, Schalkwijk 2016, Wahlström *et al.* 2018, Heynen 2023).

For instance, when examining Hong Kong youth activists fight for change, Pang (2020) suggests: 'We are seeing Hong Kong trapped at a crossroads, struggling with opposing ways of asserting unity or embracing differences' (172). She is especially concerned about the conflict between the elite interests 'prodevelopment communitarianism' and the younger generation's 'antidevelopment' community discourse, which was forged by a strong democratic spirit (169). Pang explains:

> Development is the rhetoric employed to justify the widening gap between the rich and the poor, a gap that is becoming so severe that it almost completely blocks social mobility … In Hong Kong, the problems are witnessed specifically in real estate prices, which have skyrocketed to the point where no ordinary person on an average income can afford to rent, let alone buy, a reasonable apartment. The younger generations have inherited and transformed the colonial communal vision to emphasize a new egalitarianism against both economic and political hegemony, morphing into a powerful oppositional force. (169)

Veg (2016) traced this oppositional moral sentiment in the protest slogans and artifacts in the Umbrella Movement of 2014. Veg argued that protest slogans were structured as 'speech acts.' Following Austin's (1973) threefold analysis of speech acts, [15] Veg suggests that Hong Kong's Umbrella movement 'represented an attempt to articulate a culturally hybrid democratic community, struggling to define deliberation as a political mechanism to regulate both its internal differences and its interaction with the broader

polity of Hong Kong' (Veg, 695). Veg examined over 1,000 slogans, texts, and other artifacts containing texts, which his team photographed during their visits to the main sites of the Umbrella Movement (Admiralty, Causeway Bay, and Mongkok) between September and December of 2014. It was a major finding in his study that the protest slogans embodied the protesters self-assertion as moral political agents: '[T]he variety of claims documented in the slogans can be understood as expansive or restrictive variations on an underlying theme that connects them. It attempts to show that notions of democracy, universal suffrage, or civil disobedience, as they are expressed in the slogans, are underpinned by an affirmation of moral and political agency, grounded in a community with variable boundaries' (677). Specifically, he cited many examples of slogans that exuded a sense of moral righteousness (e.g. 'Democracy is fought for by standing up, not begged for by kneeling down' 民主是站起來爭，不是跪下來求; 'I want real universal suffrage. Hongkongers support Hongkongers' 我要真普選, 香港人撐香港人).

Many of the protest chants used subsequently in the 2019 anti-ELAB movement showed a clear ideological continuity. These political sayings sprang from a progressively heated environment of confrontation between the demonstrators and the police during the peak of the unrest. Indeed, by the autumn of 2019, the appeal for moral conscience would become very explicit, as seen in various social media posts carrying such slogans as 'The Conscience is Priceless, Defend the Core Values.' 良知無價, 堅守核心價值 and 'Yellow and Blue refer to Political Camps, but Black and White are about our Conscience.' 黃藍是政見, 良知是黑白. Other social media posts championed the conscientiousness to never give up on each other, espousing the value of solidarity as the important stalwart of the protesters moral conscience, such as 'We'd rather Sacrifice our Future than our Fellow Fighters. 寧放棄前途，不放棄同伴 and 'Being Together / Standing Together.' 齊上齊落. To understand the implications and effects of these messages for the movement, we must not see them as mere sloganeering. Rather, during the movement, they were intensely and widely circulated, especially on digital platforms such as the LIHKG (連登).[16] In doing so, the youth protesters were at one level circulating these flag-waving mantras to boost morale, but on another level, they were attempting to use them to perform the more important work of arousing a 'moral awakening' that would drive their motivation to act.

The same conscience around togetherness can also be gleaned from our interviews of participants in the GOODMATES challenge programme. When asked to propose solutions to help rebuild a culture of 'common good' in society, Rosa (25, HKSAR) responded by saying: 'My own personality is to want to be more in touch with the needs of others. So I want to be a person who can see and respond to the needs of others. When I see others struggling, I am not willing to stand by and do nothing because of my

conscience. Sometimes it can bring troubles, but I feel that when everyone around me is fighting a battle, I will think hard about what I can do to help. At least I can be a fellow traveller (同行者).' [17] Reflecting a similar sentiment, Marilyn (22, HKSAR) brought up a story about social alienation and discrimination that she witnessed:

> A lot of the times the problems arise from prejudice and like assumptions from people who have that kind of bias is not justified. For instance, in Hong Kong it's supposed to be a very international and diverse community, and yet a lot of people are still feeling a sense of disconnection toward people of other races. And one problem that one thing that I have to borrow from my friend's story that one time she went to tutor in a house. And then apparently the parent didn't know that she was Pakistani. And she rejected her because she thinks she was smelly. But my friend didn't smell so that's obviously some prejudice, and that's very stereotyped.

She went on to say she saw this type of victimization in other places: 'Discrimination also happens in the education setting as well, and we see a lot of those kids with mental illnesses or special education needs being labelled as some people who like really need special attention, and so they are being cast aside, and people aren't willing to play with them or like interact with them so that is built up in ignorance and ignorance fuels it.' Marilyn shared that those experiences had led her to develop a conscientiousness around social equality: 'I try to remind myself if I were in that person's shoe, or if the situation was switched, what would I feel? … So this is something that I would do to like, remind myself, to treat people equally.'

Identifying with the victims, emphatic thinking, a moral conviction on total unity, a moralist emphasis on equality: these are all important ingredients for building a commoner subjectivity. Here, I find Sonia Lam-Knott's (2019) notion of 'moralist activism' useful to capture such sentiments: 'In Hong Kong, moral personhood is brought into being by youth activists refashioning themselves into protesters embodying a political subjectivity that places their sense of morality – their 'good heart/conscience' – at the core of their political mobilizations to redress what they consider to be wrong and problematic in the city' (385).

Conclusion: toward an understanding of 'restorative commoning'

Writing in a period of social and political stabilization in Hong Kong – after both the events of 2019 and the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic – I hope to point out that the local youth, moderate in their outlooks, have not stopped searching for alternative and creative ways to care and strive for social change. Through conjoining the value and logic of caring and commoning, they are still in search of ways to move beyond the

dominant structural logics of neoliberalism that produced alienation. In fact, it is suggested that they are practising 'restorative commoning' at this juncture: through care work of different sorts, the moderate youth/commoners have strived to develop collective practices of care holding the shared meanings of recovery, healing, and even a sense of social equilibrium through radical togetherness. There is a simplicity and an idealism in many of our informants articulation of this sense of restoration/renewal; for them, the association, intermingling, and communication of citizens together, plain as they are, turn out to be vital for regenerating a sense of inclusive community. Henry (21, HKSAR) was among whom this straightforwardness was conveyed: 'Rebuilding a common good is reconnecting different groups in Hong Kong. I think the situation in Hong Kong after the protests, it divided into fractions … If Hong Kong wants to strive for the common good, they have to reconnect. We cannot have a common good without listening to different perspectives. Communication, talking, it's the very first step.' In all, we gathered from many of our informants a keen desire to move forward and be proactive. Further work will be needed to gain a fuller understanding of this kind of 'restorative commoning,' in terms of how it would entail a durable moral commitment to *inclusivity* in disposition (e.g. through empathic thinking), in conviction (e.g. equality and an unwavering unity), and in practice (e.g. through a gradual building up of different kinds of self – and collective community regenerative programmes, resource sharing and volunteering, etc.).

Notes

1. The anti-ELAB movement of 2019 was a series of demonstrations against the Hong Kong government's introduction of a bill to amend the Fugitive Offenders Ordinance in regard to extradition. By 2019, twenty-two years after the handover, the public's continued scepticism to perceived encroachment into their way of life by the Mainland Chinese authority was not new. The scepticism grew to a staunch resistance to the proposed extradition bill allowing the city's authorities to transfer suspected individuals for crime to be handled by the Mainland legal system. The government pressed ahead with the bill despite a massive public protest of two million people on the eve of the government's action. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2019%E2%80%932020_Hong_Kong_protests.
2. On the one hand, events of economic meltdown, racial tension, human rights abuse, political far-rightism, the new Cold War, climate change, and so on, have significantly marked their lives. On the other, youth's sense of agency has been growing, as it intertwined with digital affordances that, when continuing with the enduring legacy of youth movements long before the internet age, has brought them new skills, capabilities, and potentials (see Heggart & Flowers, 2023).
3. VolTra's annual report, 2021–2022 (p.8). https://www.voltra.org/en/annual-report-2021-2022.
4. Developed by VolTra, the app GOODMATES is a community interaction and service platform. The app has enabled more than 5,000 users from different

countries to form and maintain international friendships. By using the app, participants engage in service-and-learning-related missions, while overcoming geographical and time constraints and learning intercultural communication skills. Significantly, GOODMATES features a sophisticated data management system, which is able to track, collate, assess, and analyze data from diverse activities and projects. Its real-time and transparent tracking of participants' 'mileage' and scores upon mission challenges encourages active engagement and a culture of collaborative learning and knowledge sharing.

5. As an illustrative example, one of the games called 'Inspiring Stories' required participants to conduct individual research on NGOs or social projects they chose and present their findings on the app in order to gain 'miles.' Other games were called 'Fairtrade Heroes,' 'Inclusive Tour Design,' 'Plant a Plant Challenge,' 'Zero Waste Day,' 'Marine Savers,' etc. The incorporation of game-like elements, such as earning points and unlocking missions, was implemented throughout the challenges. Upon completing the Stage One games, a total of 50 EduHK participants and 150 overseas participants demonstrated active participation by gaining more than 70% of the miles in Stage One, thereby qualifying to enter Stage Two.
6. The 40 participants were chosen based firstly on their accumulative 'miles' (the 'miles' on GOODMATES serve as a quantitative measure to assess their overall level of engagement, mission completion, involvement in discussions, as well the infographic design content and group project presentations), and secondly on qualitative assessment by a panel of judges (who considered factors such as the depth of understanding, their experiences in cultural exchange, and their level of commitment to embracing the Program's core values demonstrated in their completed tasks).
7. The international youth whom we interviewed came largely from Southeast and South Asia (specifically, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, India, Vietnam, Myanmar, and the Philippines). The others in this group came from Peru, Colombia, and Kenya. Unlike the first group, the youth in the second group pursued a much more diverse set of studies, including, for instance, architecture (2), management (2), business administration (2), English language and literature (3), commerce (1), medicine (1), nursing (1), clinical audiology (1), law (1), engineering (1), design (1), international relations (1), medical laboratory science (1), nursing (1), and economics (1).
8. Original: '我上莊那年是社運，身边有的人被控告，被捉走，我政見上是沒有很 radical，覺得這件事黑白不是那麼分明，明白裡面有很多 intricacy，有些東西未必是我們想的那麼簡單。But at the same time 我知道政策上我們改變不了整個社會，身邊亦有很多人受到很大的情緒困擾，很多人不安，不知道怎麼做，很多人問很多問題沒有答案，這讓我更加關心人，變得 radical 在於我要更加抓緊自己所信的東西，自己一些原則更加要堅持，更加帶頭關心困苦或者迷惘的人。'
9. Original: 'Compare上一個 generation 我們可能激進少少，因為上一代是戰後的時期，百業皆興，大家都比較開心；現在就會有些人指出問題，採取行動，有些人就會覺得這是極端，但其實對比革命以及打仗，我們又是比較溫和的。我覺得青少年應該要做發聲的角色，voice out，如果不發聲就會慢慢 adapt，不覺得問題是問題了。'
10. The Care Collective's argument can be summarized in this way: Through its imposition by the invisible hands of states and international organizations such as the World Bank, the IMF, and the WTO, neoliberalism has unleashed

wave upon wave of privatization of health, transportation, and other basic service systems that formed part of the infrastructure of the capitalist welfare state, thereby leaving people out of work, bereft of medical care, and even more impoverish than ever. Neoliberal capitalism's functionaries have erected before our eyes an idol of a profit-seeking and independent individual whose only concern is self-interest and the accumulation of more profits through the marketization of everything. If Hannah Arendt had identified a banality of evil in fascism, the Manifesto perceives a banality of carelessness in the world of neoliberalism, a carelessness that has emptied the human soul, doubly depriving us of the ability to care and the access to care.

11. Original: '人的貪心，一些明明不符合資格取用的資源只要免費都照取，就會導致資源不足。'
12. Original: '一方面就是社會資源的分配不均，資源大多分配去商業的範疇，例如土地分配很多商業用地，那很難有太多的公眾地方可以撥出來。然後另一方面就是 awareness 的問題，可能香港人不是很習慣跟別人分享，比較個人主義，會比較著重 private ownership right，雖然這個通常形容房屋，但我覺得可以推去其他層面，大家會想自己去幫一件事 instead of 跟別人分享一件事。'
13. Original: '自私，有一班人本身是 privileged 的，有很多資源但不想分享，這是common good最大的難關.'
14. For the discussion of the question of consciousness, I mainly drew on Snow and Lessor's important essay, 'Consciousness, Conscience, and Social Movements.' The relationship that their essay draws between those three terms in some ways aligns with the relationships that this essay sought to investigate. In other words, I was not so much interested in the political genealogy of the concept of, say, consciousness (e.g. the Russian Menshevik/Bolshevik debate of the peasants' class consciousness, Walzer's (1974) theory of how democratic citizenship is linked to political consciousness, or Lawrence Kohlberg's moral development theory as applied to critical political theory (see Reid and Yanarella 1977), etc.).
15. According to Veg (2016), J.L. Austins's analysis of speech acts comprises the 'illocutionary dimension' of the slogans (focusing on their 'intended meaning'), the 'locutionary dimension' (focusing on the textuality of the slogans themselves, paying specific attention to the stock of cultural and historical references they mobilize), and finally, their 'perluctionary dimension' (or their communicational effect within a Habermasian framework of the public sphere) (see Veg, 674-675).
16. After two years of learning about movement dynamics and experimenting with digital activism, Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement protesters created a new online forum called LIHKG (連登) in 2016. During the 2014 Umbrella Movement, the HKGolden Forum (香港高登討論區) served as the key rallying point. However, as more users became tired of HKGolden's user limitations, they started to move towards LIHKG in search of what they perceived to be a more open environment for producing and sharing political content (Erni & Zhang, 2022; Lee et al., 2021b; Yeo, 2019). In a newspaper poll conducted during the demonstration on July 1, 2019, 55% of respondents selected LIHKG as the most important medium (Apple Daily, 2019; see also Liu & Wong, 2019). The LIHKG forum was seen by users as a secure haven for diverse political views because it allowed for anonymity and 'thread popularity' through user voting (see Liang & Lee, 2021). Additionally, Lee et al. (2021a)

demonstrated that LIHKG gained popularity as a result of the forum's success in capturing movement dynamics and conditions, such as the existence of a high degree of trust and solidarity, the rapid evolution of movement tactics, and a protest culture emphasizing bottom-up participation and spontaneity (see also Lee, 2020).

17. Original: '我自己的性格是比較容易in touch with 別人的需要，所以我想做一個去見到別人的需要，去回應這個需要的人。很多時候看見別人在掙扎我不甘心不幫忙，會過不了自己的良心，conscience。有時候當然會很麻煩，但我覺得身邊每個人都 fight a battle 的時候我就會去反思我能夠做什麼，我起碼可以做一個同行者。

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